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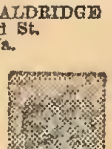

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Weird Tales

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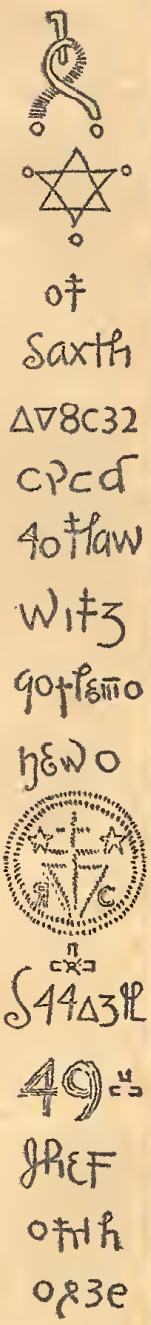

Spotted Satan

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE & E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Weird death strikes in Burma, again and again—a gripping story about a leopard that was not a leopard, and a beautiful nautch girl who became one of its victims

HARRISON STEELE'S broad shoulders and rugged features usually got two glances from women: the first being one of approval, the second a query. They could never quite decide whether his tanned face was handsome, or merely interesting. But the Eurasian telephone operator in the outer

office of the Irrawaddy Teak Company upset the routine. Her black and faintly slanted eyes were saying, "Too bad!"

Then she caught Steele's pleasant gray glance, shook her sleek head, and brightened. He might have a chance in the jungle, after all, though none of the others had survived.

"Mr. Powell will see you at once," she said.

A Chinese clerk in white led the way down the hall and to Eldon Powell's spacious office. The room was paneled in teak, and the broad desk was made of that noble wood, dark, heavy, enduring. The big Englishman liked the solidity of the teak taken from the company's forests, but for the moment, Powell did not like Burma. Steele could see that at a glance.

"You lost little time packing. Awfully good of you to take it all so seriously. I rather feared you'd not be interested in anything as common as leopards."

"Why not?" Steele's smile became an amiable grin, and his face no longer seemed to have been hewn from knotty oak. He optimistically dragged his chair into what he thought was the spot where the lazily swaying *punkahs* * stirred the humid air. "When a leopard gets you worried, that's news. But it was a lot cooler in Penang!"

"Beastly climate," Powell deplored. He did not waste any effort in mopping his ruddy face. Rangoon was steaming. "Now, this business of a reward for shooting the brute. I know jolly well you're not interested in that. We've offered the native *shikaris* a thousand rupees, and no takers. Er . . . not any more, I mean. They used to flock in, but——"

"Got the wind up, eh?"

Powell nodded. "Can't say that I blame them. So the directors authorized me to offer you five times that much." He made an apologetic gesture. "No offense, old man. But the only way to make a thing look important to you American chaps is to—ah—put a cash appraisal on it, so to speak."

Steele smiled wryly. "Now, what's the catch? Leopard's aren't sport, ordinarily. But with the cash appraisal you British chaps put on everything, I knew this must be a two-fisted beast or you'd not be so extravagant."

Powell threw up his hands. "I say, now. You're ribbing me, eh?"

"I guess we're even," Steele chuckled. "What's the score?"

Powell stroked his straw-colored mustache. "None of the white hunters who went after the leopard had much luck. Two disappeared entirely. Another—really a promising chap—all we found of him was a belt buckle and a few other inedible bits. Quite too bad. I had to get in touch with poor Henderson's relatives and explain just why we couldn't ship the remains home."

"That would be awkward, telling them there just wasn't anything to ship," Steele agreed. "But I won't embarrass you. First, I may drill the brute, and second, I have no relatives—though there's an oversized Afghan who follows me around like a nurse-maid. Achmet will be a good gun-bearer."

During all this exchange of grim pleasantries, Steele was thinking of the pretty Eurasian girl's obvious concern and sympathy. He would have paid little attention to Powell, who was always inclined to pessimism. A servant brought in whisky and soda. Steele selected a cheroot, and watched Powell spend a few moments at indoor mustache chewing.

Finally the big Englishman squirmed in his chair, coughed, and looked very uncomfortable. "Ah—er—I say, Steele, I've not told you all of it. It makes me no end of an ass, but I simply must tell you. The natives at our teak camp in the Chin Hills insist the leopard isn't a leopard except at night. During the day he's sup-

* Fan.

posed to be a man or a demon or a *nat.*"

"Huh?" Steele straightened. "What's that?"

'Now, see here, old chap. *I* don't believe that blasted rot. But if you don't kill the beggar pretty soon, our coolies will desert to the last man, and we won't get any logs down to the creek beds in time for the freshets. *That's* why there's a reward, you know. Important hunter gunning for thousands of rupees. Good for the native morale. Then you get him, and everything is peaceful and happy."

"And dear old Irrawady Teak pays dividends — provided I hunt down the spotted satan?"

"Exactly. And you'll go, of course?" Powell leaned forward in his chair. "I'd appreciate it, no end. As a personal favor."

"The devil wears spots by night." Steele frowned. Asia has her share of the inexplicable, but men sometimes pull the strings. "I've heard of such things. But I've also heard of jugglery by unscrupulous competitors. Tricks to demoralize laborers."

Powell had considered that angle. "I said as much to Kirby—he's our camp superintendent—but he assures me it's not that simple."

"Kirby——" Steele slowly pronounced the name. It suggested something unpleasant, but he did not quite know how to justify this feeling. "He's reliable, of course? Old employee, I mean?"

"Not old, no, but well recommended. A bit odd, but what teak-logger isn't! He's all broken up by the furore."

THE following morning, Steel and his Afghan servant set out by rail for Mandalay, and thence for Monywa. There they boarded a wheezing stern-wheeler, the *Shillong,* and headed up the river. At Hlai-bin-doung they disembarked. The remainder of the trip would be a day's march through jungle trails.

The headman of Hlai-bin-doung escorted Steele and Achmet to the *dâk bungalow* * which the Government maintained for travelers. It stood on stilts which raised it from the steaming ground; a weather-beaten and uninviting house with a corrugated iron roof and a veranda canopied with similar material.

The long shadows of ruined pagodas marched across the compound which inclosed the bungalow. A Buddhist monk in the near-by monastery was beating a wooden bell; the hollow notes were mournful, and they blotted out the chatter of the village, which was a few hundred yards away. Other monks intoned a ritual in Pali, the sacred language. Someone, centuries ago, had acquired merit by endowing this monastery, and thus men with shaven heads and yellow robes praised the Buddha Gautama, quite as though the jungle had not remorselessly engulfed what once had been cleared ground.

Steele could not understand the chanting, but it made him shiver. Where slayers lurked in every thicket, where villages were surrounded by thorny hedges to keep out murderous *dacoits,* these monks praised the Buddha who had forsaken a throne to bring peace to all living things. All slaying was evil, and hunters were the most accursed of men: and this thought lived in a land where each ate until he was eaten.

The voices and the bells shook Steele. If monks could stay here and sing of peace to all living things, then anything was possible. Incredible Burma began speaking to him, and he was uneasy. This was not quite like sitting in Eldon Powell's office and saying that a leopard was a leopard; in the jungle, a man might become a spotted satan. . . .

When the sun dipped over the jungle and reddened the tops of crumbling pagodas, Achmet combed his hennaed beard and faced toward Mekka for evening

* Inn.

prayer. *"El hamdulilah i rab' il alameen!"* the big Afghan rumbled. *"Malik i yaum id-deen!"*

It was good to hear a man's deep voice call on One God, where every tree was guarded by a demon, and where many gods haunted every mountain. "Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Two Worlds! King of the Day of Judgment. . . ."

The sound was aggressive, deep-chested, confident: it fought the insidious cry of wooden bells. Gaudily dressed natives gathered at the open gate of Steele's compound. Averaging but a few inches over five feet, they marveled at the Afghan's height and his hooked nose and fierce eyes; though his henna-dyed beard was the greatest wonder.

They could no more understand his guttural speech than he could their sing-song Burmese; but Steele caught enough of their chatter to know that the news of his mission had preceded him. The natives were certain that in spite of the size of master and man, the leopard demon would dispose of them as readily as he had the other *shikaris.**

ACHMET'S prayers were scarcely completed when the crowd parted to admit Panbyu, the headman's daughter. Balanced on her head was a wicker tray which contained half a dozen bowls of food. There was rice, chicken, curry, and small dried fish whose high fragrance convinced Steele that the Burmese must be immune to ptomaine poisoning.

She wore a scarlet jacket with purple sleeves. Her pink skirt was slit up the side so that despite her mincing, pigeon-toed gait, her legs were exposed well past the knee. *"Billahi,"* said Achmet, eyeing the smiling girl, "these chattering apes have pretty women."

Neither could understand the other, but Steele caught the exchange, and Panbyu's smile and the flash of her oblique eyes. He was certain that Achmet would not need an interpreter.

The tall Afghan wolfed his rice. He grinned broadly when he heard the sounds from the village. Musicians were tuning up their instruments. Panbyu said that a festival was about to start, and that the honored visitors were welcome.

"Sahib," Achmet began, when Steele translated the girl's remark, "it would be well if I mingled with the villagers. By Allah, I might learn some secrets about the Satan-leopard. With your honor's permission——"

The girl smiled, and came nearer, to get the empty dishes. Steele said to his servant, "Go ahead, but don't get into any fights."

That Achmet could not understand a word of Burmese did not for a moment make his request seem illogical to him. He was a master at devising reasons for following his stubborn fancies.

The villagers had little confidence in the hunters. Thus there was ample reason for music and dancing and the impromptu clowning of a *pwè.** The festival was not in honor of Steele; his arrival had been merely an excuse for celebrating. Had he not been there, the full moon would have been ample reason.

And knowing that Burmese peculiarity, Steele lit a cheroot, and watched Achmet crossing the compound, to follow Panbyu.

And then night invaded the clearing. The chilly breeze stirred the bamboos to ghostly, inarticulate speech. A jackal howled from afar, and owls hooted from the jungle over which towered the spires of long-ruined pagodas. Laughter and strangely syncopated music filtered from the toddy palms and tamarinds and mangoes that half concealed the village. The *dâk bungalow* had become a dark island in a deceptive sea of moonlight. It was incredibly isolated. Some trick of the wind,

* Native hunters.

* Celebration.

perhaps, made the festive cacophony of the *pwé* as though it came from another world.

Steele was no longer conscious of the soporific drumbeats and xylophone notes; nevertheless he felt the incessant impact, and began to feel the concentration of the disturbing, vague whispers that had centered on him ever since he had entered Eldon Powell's office in Rangoon.

Steele kicked the dying fire, shivered in the penetrating chill, and told himself that he had listened to too many whispers concerning Thagya Min, King of Tawadeintha —the land of demons, *nats* who haunted every stream, every grove and forest, lurking by night to slip up on unwary Burmese. From afar he heard the excruciating *creak-creak* of a cart-wheel. The ungreased axle did not betoken laziness on the part of the driver; it was a studied effort to frighten away night-roving *nats* that contribute to terror of darkness.

He began to sense that the *pwé* itself was more than festivity: it was to discourage with light and noise and a concentration of humans the *nats* who must have followed Steele to the village.

The demon subjects of Thagya Min would have a hearty interest in anyone setting out to kill the ghost leopard of Kokogon.

"To hell with this!" he finally muttered, shaking off oppressive, errant fancies. Instead of heaping more fuel on the fire, Steele sought the warmth of his blankets. The wind, sifting up between the cracks in the floor, was peculiarly penetrating—as penetrating as the insidious, scarcely heard rhythm that filtered from the *zariba* * that surrounded the village. A dizzying procession of Burmese girls statuesquely postured before Steele's closed eyes. They were now pacing and gesturing to demon music from the court of Thagya Min, and the hollow notes of cunningly tuned pieces of hardwood, vibrant under dancing mallets, whispered to the ears of sleep.

A touch of fever . . . too many of those dried, reeking fish that no white man should eat . . . : or trying to keep pace with Achmet's demolition of a heap of curry as tall as a pagoda . . . : but finally the trenchant chill ceased lancing the blankets, and it no longer seemed cold in the *dâk bungalow*. . . .

It was now very warm and pleasant. Yet, though Steele was asleep, he was nevertheless aware of the moon-flooded clearing, and the gable-roofed monastery in the eastern wing of which sat the Buddha Gautama. Oddly enough, the walls of the bungalow did not keep Steele from perceiving the three-roofed *pyathat* beneath which the Buddha sat in the posture he had prescribed for meditation.

One acquires merit through meditation. But it was much more spectacular to acquire merit by building pagodas. The ruined pagodas at the jungle's edge were the ghosts of merit forgotten save by the lords of Karma.

The clearing was dominated by the shadow of pious work, and the Buddha Gautama could scarcely help being pleased. His face was still obscured, although Steele could now perceive the gilded bulk that loomed in the darkness of the *hpaya kyaung*. It no longer seemed odd to Steele that he could be aware of so many things at once.

And then a jarring thought intruded: something was urging him to open his eyes, which was absurd, since with his present clarity of vision the position of his eyelids was immaterial. Steele became intensely annoyed. It was Achmet who was urging him to open his eyes. Achmet, full of intoxicating *kaungye,* would be boisterous as well as bawdy. . . .

It was Steele's instinct that saved him: an indefinable shred of perception that had not been submerged by the glamor of the

* Thornbush fence.

nat-infested night. Even before he opened his eyes or ceased to resent the disturbing summons, he flung himself clear of blankets and cot. In the darkness he saw a flashing streak of frosty silver, and a blotch of shadow that moved with it. He felt the rake of steel, the passing contact of a wiry body, heard the roaring voice of Achmet, and the Afghan's feet pounding from the veranda to Steele's room.

Steele's foot lashed out as he hit the floor. There was a gasp of exhaled breath. The broad blade of a *kukri* savagely probed the gloom. Steele's fist warded off the descending wrist—but before he could seize the wiry assassin, Achmet had cleared the threshold.

A wrathful yell—a crash—the splintering of wood—the tinkle of steel—a cry of dismay that ended in a gurgling groan—and Achmet, cursing in polished Bushtu, struck a match.

The intruder was dead: a wiry, grizzled Burmese with straggling wisps of gray beard. His brown skin was intricately tattooed, and his body gleamed from freshly applied palm oil. He was nude save for a breech-clout.

Steele assured Achmet that the fellow must be a *dacoit*.* The Afghan respectfully agreed: but Steele knew that his comrade at arms had a private and dissenting opinion.

2

"OUT with it, Achmet!" Steele finally demanded. "What makes you think he's not a *dacoit?*"

"*Billahi!* Since when does a *dacoit* sit in the darkness making music while his fellow seeks you with a knife? Nay, by Allah, that was not the music of the *pwé* which you heard—that was devil music. The *pwé* has been over these several hours—I? *Wallah,* I was otherwise engaged—I had no thought—by Allah, it is a disgrace to my beard that this thing should have happened, but by your head, I had no thought——"

"Say no more about it," chuckled Steele. "After all, there was doubtless certain unfinished business which required your attention after the *pwé,* but then what?"

"As my lord suggested, when that was done which was to be done, I returned and heard, and I liked not that sound which came from the shadows. So I smote the musician, and then I saw another—*Wallah,* I will here and now kill that son of a noseless mother!"

The Afghan's pious intent, however, was wasted. Neither musician nor instrument was lying where both had dropped.

"Get Maung Hkin—the headman of the village," said Steele. "At once."

The Afghan stalked cursing into the moonlight. He knew no Burmese—other than what he might have learned from Panbyu—but there was no doubt that he would arouse the entire village and thus, perforce, the headman as well. Steele had learned to put much trust in Afghan directness.

And within a very few minutes Maung Hkin entered the compound, followed by half the inhabitants of Hlai-bin-doung. They were trotting to keep up with Achmet's leg-stretching strides.

"May pigs befoul my grave if I destroy not all of this village!" growled Achmet as he stalked across the compound. "*Wallah,* I have here the father of all these apes! Shall I slay him now?"

Steele, however, was willing enough to dispense with further slayings; and he mustered up enough of the tricky Burmese language to make it clear to the headman that there had been odd doings in the *dâk bungalow*. But one glance at the deceased was sufficient for Maung Hkin.

"This man," he explained, "is an apprentice wizard. Behold—he is tattooed

* Robber.

with *inns* to protect him against knives, bullets, poison, and lightning. Fortunately he wore no *inn* to protect him against a broken neck and a crushed skull.

"And as for that music: that was a charm to keep you from awakening. It seems that you were taken for a rival wizard. Or perhaps he wanted your head to use in preparing a spell. But it is most likely that he is a servant of the demon leopard, sent to protect the devouring *nat* against your skill."

That was the headman's story. He seemed to believe it, and it was obvious that nothing could change it. It was quite irrational, and thus entirely in keeping with the beliefs of devil-haunted Burma, where Indian, Mongolian, and indigenous fiends do their best to oppress the inhabitants of the mountains and forests. But Maung Hkin had one constructive hint: "Let no one know the hour of your birth. And there is a certain but dangerous way of defending yourself against *sohns*. Go up the Chindwin to Kalay-Thoung-Toht — the-Small-Town-at-the-Top-of-the-Sandbank. The inhabitants are supernaturally gifted. Appeal to the king of wizards who lives there. He will summon the *sohn* who is working against you, demand an explanation, and if he can show no just cause, he will be punished.

"But it is only fair to warn you that many bewitched people who have made that pilgrimage have disappeared."

"Thanks," acknowledged Steele. "But as long as wizards' heads are readily broken I don't think we'll bother to go to Kalay Thoung Toht."

In less than an hour breakfast would be served, the elephants loaded, and the ponies saddled in preparation for the last lap of the trip to the teak camp at the head of the Kyouk-mee-Choung. Steele sat down and drew up a brief report to be sent to Eldon Powell in Rangoon. He outlined the circumstances, and concluded:

"Your were-leopard has human allies. I am inclined to think that the depradations of the beast are directly designed to interfere with your floating teak logs down in the coming freshets. I suggest that you investigate your neighboring competitors while Achmet and I put a crimp into the local guild of wizards."

STEELE and Achmet cleared the compound at sunrise; but it was not until fourteen hours later that they reached their destination at the teak camp of the Irrawaddy Company. The corporation bungalow was in a grassy plain. Near it were storehouses, stables, and a cluster of huts for the native woodmen; and beyond was the expanse of dense forest, towering teak interspersed with pyingado, padauk, and other unreserved or "jungle" woods not subject to Government regulation.

The *kansammah*,* Sayo-myo, emerged to receive Steele and Achmet. Kirby, the camp manager, was out in the forest, hunting the man-eating leopard. And while Saya-Myo set about preparing supper, Steele made a round of the camp, watching the unloading of the baggage and the grooming of the shaggy Shan ponies. The day's work was done; the elephants had been fed. Some were bathing in the creek near by, others were crashing through the underbrush, foraging to supplement their evening meal.

The camp, Steele observed, had been demoralized by the leopard's raids. The loggers and mahouts squatted about their fires, furtively eyeing the darkness beyond; and while Steele could scarcely understand their low, sing-song conversation, scattering phrases told him of the fear that lurked. There was talk of *inns*, and amulets to ward off the destructive night demon; and there was more talk of desertion, and certain mutterings about a sacred grove. . . .

* Headman.

Kirby, it was obvious, was in charge of a simmering nightmare.

Supper was more than adequate, despite can-opener cookery. The camp commissary was well stocked, and the cook was competent; yet Kirby, oppressed by the inroads of the marauder, had at the first sign of dusk plunged alone into the forest, ignoring the meal that awaited him.

"He won't last very long at that rate," Steele reflected. "One white man, surrounded by superstitious natives, and for months out of contact with civilization—no damn wonder it gets his goat."

Ten o'clock, and still no sign of Kirby.

"Achmet," Steele finally said, "grab yourself some sleep. I'll wait until midnight, and then wake you for the next watch."

"No, by Allah! Last night my face was blackened. If there are any wandering wizards tonight——"

The Afghan loosened the pistol in his holster, and shifted the Khorassan tulwar whose silver hilt gleamed from his belt.

"Without doubt," he continued, "Kirby *Sahib* has been eaten by this *shaitan*-leopard. Do you therefore sleep, while I stand guard."

And seeing that Achmet would stubbornly insist upon redeeming himself for the previous night's distraction, Steele let him stand guard.

STEELE'S sleep was sound, but it was violently interrupted. An agonized yell brought him to his feet at a bound. Then savage growls, and a howling panic from the woodcutters' huts. Steele seized his loaded rifle. "God, by the very God, by the One True God!" roared Achmet as Steele followed him, clearing the veranda at a bound. "Hear the accursed beast!"

As he caught up with Achmet, Steele thrust a flashlight into the Afghan's hand.

"Pick him out while I plug him!"

They crossed the clearing in a matter of seconds. The savage snarling of the marauder, and the gurgling, strangled cries of the victim guided them. Achmet turned the beam of the flashlight toward the sound and the phosphorescent eyes that gleamed in the gloom.

"In the great name of Allah I take refuge from Shaytan the Stoned!" exclaimed Achmet as the tongue of light picked the eater and the eaten. "The grandfather of leopards!"

The white glare confirmed the Afghan's words; but for the jet-black spots that dotted the sleek, tawny hide, Steele would have thought that it was a tiger that growled and bared fangs like ivory similtars. Its jaws dripped red, and its tail lashed in slow, menacing cadence as its muscles rippled beneath its silky hide. But more striking than its feline savagery and unusual size was the wrath and menace that it radiated. Steele felt the fury of the creature as though it emanated waves of tangible force.

The chilly breeze was laden with the feline odor of the beast—like the odor of a lion's den, but more intense.

Grandfather of leopards—in a flickering instant, Steele's impressions confirmed the Afghan's incredulous ejaculation. The mangled woodcutter still twitched, but he no longer groaned.

It was an easy shot, and the beast seemed dazzled by the blistering glare of the flashlight. Steele's rifle flashed into line. The fluent, long-practised gesture ended in a spurt of flame, a gust of nitrous fumes, and the ear-shattering blast of cordite. A streak of orange velvet—a wrathful, almost human yell—and before Steele could shift his line of fire, there was a scarcely perceptible rustling in the farther shadows.

The leopard was gone. He had seemingly timed the contraction of Steele's trigger finger, and flung himself aside as the front sight of the express rifle registered between his glowing eyes.

"Damn!" growled Steele; and Achmet muttered unmentionable things in Pushtu as he saw something he had never seen before: Steele *Sahib* missing an easy shot.

"But you must at least have wounded him," the Afghan insisted.

Steele shook his head.

"Can't tell. So much blood spattered about. Fact is, I'm sure I didn't. I'd swear the ——— ——— evaporated just as I poured it to him."

"And now," was Achmet's optimistic prediction, "since we have interrupted his feeding, he will go out and hunt down Kirby *Sahib*—if he has not already done so."

Very likely, Steele reflected, if Kirby was not dead, or fatally wounded, he must be lost. No one in his right mind would be bushwhacking from sunset until well after midnight.

"But if Kirby has had much of this to contend with," Steele added, listening to the panicky chatter of the surviving woodcutters, "he can't be in his right mind. By Heaven, if I can't shoot any better than that I'm going to get a bayonet and charge the next time I see that spotted ———!"

And Achmet Nadir Khan of the Durani clan was somberly muttering to himself, *"To the Lord of the Daybreak I betake me for refuge against Satan the Damned, and against the evils of creation, and against the envy of the envier when he envieth, and against the wiles of women who murmur and blow on knots. . . ."*

3

ACHMET, despite his mutterings, insisted on standing the remainder of the watch; but he built a fire just in front of the veranda steps, and walked his post with curved tulwar drawn and ready to strike. And Steele, despite the tragedy that had taken place, borrowed the fatalistic attitude of the Burmese woodcutters who had composed themselves with the cheery thought that since the demon leopard had drunk blood he would not return until the following night.

"By Heaven," was Steele's last waking thought, "I couldn't miss that beast at that range and in that light. Something's cockeyed."

But the fault could certainly not have been with Steele's ammunition. The unexpended cartridge in his rifle was sound in every respect, and the vigorous recoil of the shot he had fired precluded the possibility of its having been a blank. Nevertheless, he was convinced that human skullduggery was allied with the monstrous leopard. The attack by the apprentice wizard at Hlai-bin-doung was ample proof of that; although this time there had been no disturbed sleep nor music from the halls of the King of Demon-Land to bemaze Steele's wits. Aside from the size and unheard-of ferocity of the beast, there had been nothing out of the ordinary except his having missed an easy shot.

And a man suddenly roused from slumber could have a lingering kink in his trigger finger.

The stirring about of the mahouts, and the loggers preparing *chota hazri,* woke Steele before the dawn was even gray. Achmet shook the dew from his red beard, sheathed his curved tulwar, and muttered a devout *"al hamdu lilahi."*

And then the Afghan made uncommonly careful ablution in preparation for the sunrise prayer. But that prayer was delayed by the arrival of a white man from the fringe of the jungle. Achmet hailed Steele; and as the newcomer stalked across the grassy clearing, they knew that he must be Kirby, the manager. There would be no other white man attached to the camp.

Achmet's eyes flashed toward Steele's; and then they both regarded the haggard, bedraggled man in shorts. Even in that wan, gray light he was unusual. There

was no doubt that he was a white man: his skin, tanned as only that of a Nordic can be, and the high bridge of his nose, and the unprominent cheek-bones, testified to his race. Yet his hazel-flecked eyes were slanted like those of a Tartar or Mongol. His mustaches, sandy-colored and bristling, jutted straight out on both sides instead of being upturned at the ends, or decently drooping, or close cropped.

His eyes widened and assumed an odd expression that Steele found disturbing and unpleasant.

"I'm Harrison Steele—from Rangoon office," Steele greeted. "I fancy Powell wrote you I'd be up to give you a lift on this leopard mess?"

"Don Kirby," was the acknowledgment. "Managing this damned madhouse, and I'm mighty glad you arrived."

The perturbed, haggard look left his face as he spoke, and his voice was amiable enough; but Steele, without knowing why, was glad that Kirby did not extend his hand. And then Steele wanted to give Achmet a sound booting: the burly Afghan was eyeing Kirby from head to foot and muttering in a hoarse whisper that carried like a cavalry bugle, "*Astaghfir 'ullah min-ash-saytan. . . .*"

"There are times," was Steele's unspoken thought, "for betaking one's self for refuge against Satan, but that red-bearded ruffian shows the damn'dest judgment in picking them."

He wondered if Kirby understood Arabic, and catching the sudden shift of the slanting, topaz eyes, Steele remarked, "Achmet's had a tough night of it—he thinks the place is bewitched because I missed letting moonlight through our friend the leopard."

"So you missed him too?"

Steele could not quite decide whether that one carried an edge or not. It might be Kirby's natural tone.

"Right enough," replied Steele. "The brute turned tail and vanished like Satan in a puff of smoke—but not until another poor devil of a woodcutter was hopelessly mangled."

And then, for a man who for months has had no occasion to use English, Kirby was uncommonly fluent. His blasphemous wrath was impressive. Finally he concluded, "And I was bushwhacking all night long, getting torn to ribbons. I figured the brute might come down to the *jeel* to drink—that's a couple of miles to the east—and I'd get a crack at him."

THAT was sound enough. The great cats do usually drink; *after they have dined*. Kirby apparently had assumed that the leopard would not miss his nightly fare. Steele noted the mud that had copiously bespattered Kirby, and concluded that it had been rough going along the banks of the marshy *jeel*.

"Taking a long chance, aren't you, going it single-handed?"

Kirby shrugged, spat disgustedly, and said, "If this keeps up, I'll not have a logger left, and I won't be able to get any from the village. The freshets are almost here, and so far we've not taken out enough logs to notice. There'll be a new manager here to handle the problem if I don't put a stop to this." Then he hailed the *kansammah,* ordered breakfast, and stepped to his room in the corporation bungalow to clean up after his night's fruitless chase.

"Achmet," demanded Steele as the Afghan approached, "what the hell were you driving at with your *'astaghfirp 'ullah'* and so forth a few minutes ago?"

"There is evil in this camp, *Sahib,*" grumbled the Afghan. "And this Kirby *Sahib* is the forgotten of Allah. By Allah, in his eyes I saw the eyes of that *shaitan*-leopard, and for a moment I was going to cut him down with my tulwar. But instead, I spoke as you heard, and I was no longer afraid."

"Since when," reproved Steele, "is one of the Durani clan afraid of anything?"

"Since when," came the crackling retort, "has a *sahib* the eyes of a leopard, and the curved nails of one? Do you now understand why he did not offer to grasp your hand as is the custom among these infidel dogs, saving your honor's presence? It was that you would not note that his nails curve more than any man's should."

And before Steele could think of a convincing answer, Achmet was stalking toward the huts of the woodcutters.

Steele joined Kirby at breakfast. The *kansammah,* serving the meal, walked as though he were treading on eggs. Despite his efforts to disguise his furtive moves, it was obvious that he was avoiding any unnecessary approach to Kirby. The fellow's manner had with the appearance of his chief changed from fatalistic resignation to wire-edged apprehension.

Kirby minced with his meal, grimaced wryly, cursed each dish in succession, then said, "This thing is getting under my skin. And the devil of it is, I dare not make a truthful report."

In response to Steele's trenchant glance, Kirby significantly tapped his forehead.

"I don't think I'm balmy yet, but I dare say I soon shall be. But if I told all that I know, Powell would order me to Rangoon and before I could say three words he'd have me in the booby-hatch—on the evidence of my own report."

Kirby was oppressively serious. And while Steele had been unable to conjure up the last trace of cordiality—beyond decent politeness—he was heartily sorry for the manager. The poor devil was in a blue funk; but his tacit admission that his reason was beginning to waver was a hopeful indication. If the man were mad, he would be the last to question his own sanity.

"The hell you say?" Steele's exclamation carried a distinct query. Kirby's hazel eyes were disturbingly unwavering for several seconds, but he ignored the hint. Steele then persisted, "Don't write it, then. While I can scarcely demand your confidence, I'm in a way entitled to it. You needn't worry about my quoting you. I won't. And if I did—well, who'd believe me?"

Kirby nodded, declined a cigarette, and finally said, "Last year, just before the freshets, we had an unusual tangle of logs and little time, as usual, to get them to the creek. The roundabout road my predecessor had built seemed insufferably stupid, so I laid out a new route for the elephants.

"I jolly well had a mutiny on my hands, but I fairly booted the woodcutters into clearing a direct approach that skirted the village, just over the hill. That road, it seemed, passed directly through a sacred grove, or some such rot—and there was no end of muttering about the *nats*——"

Kirby gritted his teeth, snarled a compound oath, and continued, "And the long and short of it is they claim that this leopard is a devil sent to avenge my—our—violating the home of the forest *nats*—the blasted unspeakable country is filthy with *nats!* The natives count 'em off by the million—offer sacrifices to them—shiver when they think of 'em—and by the Lord, I'm getting that way myself!

"Damn it, Steele—I'm convinced this devil leopard is a *nat!*—that it's hounding me to death, killing my men—but can I report that story to Powell? Can I?"

Steele stroked his chin and exhaled a jet of smoke. He could not offer Kirby any assurance. You can't assure a grown white man against the wrath of wizards and evil spirits. And regardless of what alienists might say, Kirby was painfully sane. He elaborated on the apparent chain of cause and effect, and concluded, "Irrespective of my personal sanity, there is a leopard, and the camp is demoralized, and if I ask Powell to shift operations to the eastern sector, I'll have to offer him some

reason other than that this one is devil-haunted.

"The only thing I can tell him is that I'm not competent to handle these woodcutters. Just one whimper about native wizards, and——"

"Correct," agreed Steele. "But just between the two of us—how about giving me the address of this wizard?"

Kirby eyed him suspiciously. He seemed on the point of answering but instead, he abruptly rose and said, "I'm placing an elephant and a mahout at your disposal. Also come *shikaris,* though they'll no more beat the brush than they'll fly. After all, Powell sent you to hunt a leopard, not a wizard. And I'm not so sure that I appreciate your trying to humor my whims."

And that, Steele perceived, put an end to any chance of getting Kirby's confidence. His only resource was to look for the spoor of the killer: which should not be difficult, as it was improbable that there was more than one beast of such unusual size in the district.

One thought, however, gnawed at Steele's mind. The demon leopard had human allies, and native wizards were involved—unless the headman of Hlai-bindoung had been fabricating to deflect suspicion from his villagers. Yet he could as well, and much more logically, have asserted that the man Achmet had brained was a *dacoit.*

"Just a few more kinks like that," muttered Steele, "and I'll join Achmet's *astagfir 'ullah* chorus! I'll be as screwy as Kirby."

4

STEELE soon learned that tracking the demon leopard was a thankless job. Neither he nor Achmet could pick up the beast's trail; and while a native *shikari* would undoubtedly find some mark that survived the milling of many feet about the place where the leopard had last struck, none could be bribed or browbeaten into the attempt. And as the result of their futile efforts, Steele and Achmet patrolled the logging-camp by night, hoping to catch the marauder as he made a raid. But again they reckoned without taking into account the diabolical cunning of the leopard; the beast avoided the huts of the woodcutters and, instead, struck at the neighboring village.

His victims were a native girl, and a mahout *en route* to the camp.

And then woodcutters began disappearing without a trace. No sign of struggle, no blood, no mangled remains indicated by the low-flying scavenger birds collecting about the scene of a slaying.

"They're deserting," said Kirby, alternating between inertia and high-pitched wrath. "By the Lord, Steele, you've not a chance. Neither have I—but I'll hunt the beast myself until one of us is accounted for."

And thus, at sunset, Kirby would slip into the forest for a night of bushwhacking as Steele and Achmet began their vigil at camp.

The manager had scarcely reached the edge of the forest when Saya-myo, the *kansammah,* accosted Steele. The fellow was obviously perturbed, and seemed to be mustering up his courage for some desperate step, but his remarks were scattered and irrelevant.

"Sound off," encouraged Steele. "What's on your mind, Saya-myo? Has that Afghan ruffian of mine been monopolizing all the ladies of the village?"

That, however, was not the trouble. It was something much more serious. And it in no wise concerned Achmet. Saya-myo glanced over one shoulder, then the other, and fingered the nine-jeweled amulet that hung from his neck. The amulet business had enjoyed a boom at the expense of teak logging.

"It is Kirby *Sahib,*" the Burmese finally

said. "He is the leopard. At night the man disappears, and he becomes a beast. He——"

"Shaytan rip him open! I suspected as much!" boomed the voice of Achmet, as his red beard heralded his advance around the corner of the bungalow. "Es-Steele *Sahib,* I will kill this man. There be only these Burmese apes, who will dare not tell what I have done."

"Shut up, you jackass!" snapped Steele. "Allah gave you much valor and no brains. Who ever heard of a man becoming a leopard by night?"

Steele had heard all too much of such things, but this was no occasion to admit it.

"*Wallah,*" grumbled the Afghan, "that at least is better than having neither brains nor valor. If that *shaitan*-leopard had killed even one of my kinsmen, I would have slit him crosswise as soon as he took back the shape of a man.

"Is it not plain as your nose that this man Kirby is the slayer? Does he not always walk by night? Is he ever seen near a slaying? Is he ever attacked by night by any beast? And mark you this: I found no footprints of a leopard near the body of the woodcutter who was killed before our eyes, but there were marks left by the boots of an infidel——"

"My own boots," interrupted Steele. "Before you could get a good look, there had been so much trampling about that all heel marks looked alike."

"The Red Beard is right," interposed Saya-myo. "And we are all dead men if he does not kill Kirby. If we stay, we die. If we run, he will hunt us down and kill us."

THE three-cornered debate was interrupted by a scarcely perceptible rustling at the edge of the clearing. Steele whirled, rifle at the ready. But it was no beast of prey that stepped from black shadow into light of the waning moon. It was Don Kirby, and the feral gleam of his eyes showed that he had heard more than enough.

"I think, Steele," was his ironic remark, "that your red-bearded wild man is nearly as bad as the Burmese. Now if you think you can keep that Afghan within the limits of the clearing, I'll risk resuming the hunt. As you say, he has more nerve than brains, and unless you restrain him, he would venture into the bush to track me down."

"God, by God, by the One True God!" growled Achmet, "verily, I would not risk meeting you in the forest by night! But saving my lord's presence, I would throttle you at sunrise when you resume the form of a man."

Kirby shook his head, eyed Steele, then said, "You begin to see what a madhouse this has become. And you, Saya-myo, what manner of talk was this you made?"

Kirby's voice was low, but vibrant. The *kansammah's* brown face had become ghastly with fright. He licked his lips, made a false start at speech, then ran howling into the forest.

"The fool's going to the temple to get some more charms," explained Kirby.

"Temple?" queried Steele. "That's a bit odd, up here in the hills. Or is it that monastery up over the hill, and beyond the village?"

Kirby shook his head.

"Not a monastery. Ruined temple. Something like those square heaps in Pagân —you might have seen them on the way up."

"Didn't cross the river," replied Steele. "But speaking of temples—is that the nest of wizards that's put the jinx on this camp?"

"Suppose you figure that out," was Kirby's somber challenge. "I'm fairly addle-brained from guessing. And in the meanwhile, I'm taking a jaunt out to the *jeel* again. I saw his footprints there, last night."

So saying, Kirby turned toward the clearing. Steele frowned as he watched his lithe, cat-like tread.

"How that guy supervises a logging-camp and stalks game every night is something to think about," he muttered. "It's a blistering cinch he can't turn into a leopard at night, but Saya-myo's mortally afraid of him. Somebody's going to get hurt. And it's not a leopard that'll put period-quotes to Kirby."

Steele hailed Achmet.

"Thou blustering oaf," he said in Pushtu, "keep a sharp eye on this camp. I am walking by the *jeel* myself."

"By Allah, *Sahib*—it is death!" warned the Afghan. "Wait until morning to slay him."

"If I see him turn into a leopard," compromised Steele, "then will we kill him as you say. Not until then."

Steele headed for the path that led through the forest to the adjoining village, but he checked his stride at the stockade that had just been built around the huts of the native foresters and hailed his mahout in a low voice.

The mahout was a fellow of indeterminate race, and named Jang. Jang's mother had doubtless bestowed the name on him in memory of some wandering Gurka. At all events, his resemblance to the Nepalese mountaineers was striking.

"Shall I get my brother?" wondered Jang, referring to his elephant. "I hear his *kalouk* over there."

"No. Hunting that *pukka shaytan** from a howdah," said Steele, "is like trying to spear porpoises from a battleship. Bring your *kukri* and we will walk by moonlight —near the *jeel*."

Jang swallowed his aversion to walking, and in a moment reappeared with the short, heavy-bladed Kurka knife which served every purpose, from paring radishes to clipping the nose from an unfaithful wife.

* Out-and-out evil spirit.

And as they plunged into the forest, Steele whispered, "I have changed my mind about the *jeel*. Lead the way to the village, and especially toward that temple."

Jang's teeth flashed in the moonlight. The sooner the *sahib* showed some sense and made magic, the sooner the marauder would cease his depredations.

Steele's suspicions concerning Kirby were far more grave than he had dared to admit to the hot-headed Afghan or the morose woodcutters. Reviling Achmet's somber mutterings was no more than a move to put a damper on the Afghan's tendency to solve all difficulties by sudden violence; and while Steele was convinced that something was startlingly wrong with Kirby, he dared not make any admissions that might lead to the camp manager's summary and secret assassination.

Leopards can be trained to hunt. And Kirby's alternation of frankness and reticence hinted that he knew more than he admitted. It was conceivable that some enemy of the teak company was using a trained leopard of unusual size to demoralize the camp, and that Kirby dared not reveal his knowledge or suspicion. And Steele's real mission that night was to overtake Saya-myo, the *kansammah* whose fear of Kirby had driven him in a panic toward the temple beyond the village.

JANG bore a straight course among the teak trunks, with his *kukri* deftly chopping the underbrush that blocked his advance. And save for such interruptions, their progress was swift and silent. Presently, as they cleared the first range of hills, Steele saw the fires of the Burmese village flickering among the vegetation and huts within the *zariba* that enclosed it.

They descended the slope, crossed a clearing, skirted a small paddy field; and in a cleft that ran cross-wise of the range, Steele saw the squarish, quasi-pyramidal bulk of the temple.

"There is a shrine of Thagyâ Min, King of Demons, *sahib,*" said Jang. "Give him gifts and perhaps he will recall his servant."

"Maybe," countered Steele with a wry grimace, "that's why Thagyâ Min sent him in the first place!"

And then Steele perceived a moving blot in the darkness ahead. It had charged from the shadows cast by the further side of the village stockade. Someone was heading for the ruined temple.

"Cut over, Jang," whispered Steele. "But don't let him know we're following him."

He had only Kirby's word for Saya-myo's destination, and in the darkness it was impossible to decide whether or not it was the *kansammah* who had slipped from the village to go to the temple; but whoever it was, it would be worth investigation. Eavesdropping would be more informative than any possible questioning of the frightened natives whose panic would inevitably intensify their distrust of any white man associated with Kirby.

As Jang beat a swift, silent course, the solitary pilgrim broke from shadow and into a moonlight clearing. It was Saya-myo, hurrying as though the devil pursued. Whether his object was a charm or counsel, it must be potent indeed to induce him to leave the *zariba.*

"Steady, there," cautioned Steele, as Jang pushed forward.

Jang halted. And then the moon patch exploded in a blaze of action. In an instant it became a contest between feline swiftness and the speed of a man whose moves short-circuited reason and perception. A snarling streak of spotted ferocity catapulted from the farther shadows. Saya-myo yelled, instinctively threw up a warding, futile arm; but the flying mass of whipcord sinews, raking claws and ivory fangs bore him to the ground as Steele's rifle-blast shook the clearing. He knew that he would miss; no marksman could possibly hit that inhumanly swift streak of tawny doom. He bounded forward, heard the savage snarl, the half-stifled yell of the *kansammah,* and leveled his rifle as his leap gave him a line of fire quite clear of the leopard's victim.

Another tearing, crackling blast of cordite; the whine of a ricochet bullet, and then a second shot. They were closely spaced as blows of a riveting hammer. Only then did Steele realize that he had again missed a perfect target. The beast should have been torn in half by the expanding bullets aimed just in the back of his shoulder.

Steele ejected the spent shells and with trembling fingers thrust fresh ones into the breech. Saya-myo was thrashing and yelling. The leopard's head shifted from his victim, and his feral eyes blazed like monstrous topazes as he snarled and spat at Steele.

Smack-smack!

The leopard's head should be a tangle of shattered bone and brains. But as the concussion of Steele's rifle died, the leopard blurred in fluent flash of motion. One long, soaring leap, and it plunged into a thicket, and disappeared. Steele and Jang pulled Saya-myo to his feet. He was pawed, and bleeding, but his throat had not been torn.

"Can't find him by daylight, and can't hit him by moonlight!" Steele wrathfully growled.

"But you did hit him!" yelled Jang, thrusting the wounded *kansammah* aside. "Look at the blood——"

"Saya-myo's."

"No, *sahib!* Yonder—see the splash?"

Jang was right. The splashes were small, but unmistakably beyond where the *kansammah's* wounds had reddened the ground. Steele, however, shared neither Saya-myo's fear of the leopard's vengeance, nor Jang's triumph and confidence. In-

stead of scratching the beast, the expanding slugs should have torn it to a tangled heap of bones and fur. As he fired, Steele had "spotted" his shots, and knew that at the instant of concussion, his rifle had been alined on the leopard's shoulder. When a trained marksman cannot call his shots, something is entirely out of gear.

"Let's see the priest," was Steele's next remark.

Saya-myo led the way. Tapers were flickering in one of the four shrines of the temple. The priest listened to the story of the encounter. His comment was brief.

"This beast is Kirby *Sahib*. He is a leopard by night. His very name—*Kirba*—in the Kanarese language means leopard. You cannot kill him unless you learn from the King of Wizards what weapon can hurt him."

"Kalay-Thoung-Toht?" queried Steele.

"Yes. The-Small-Town-at-the-Top-of-the-Sandbank. And if you still doubt that this Kirby is a leopard, consider that he knew Saya-myo's destination, and followed him—even as you did. It is plain."

5

"BY Allah, *sahib!*" boomed a deep voice from the doorway. "That man speaks sense."

Achmet was at the threshold, nodding and stroking his red beard.

"I told you to stay and watch the camp," reproved Steele.

"*Wallah,* seeing that thou wert gone, there was nothing to watch, except these ape men. And I heard the sound of firing."

There was no arguing with the Afghan. True to type, he masked his breach of discipline by appealing to Steele's appreciation of loyalty. The worst of it was that Achmet had heard the old priest's ideas on Kirby. Something had to be done to keep the Afghan from setting out at once to hunt Kirby; but before Steele could find words, his attention was distracted by the wailing of pipes and the mutter of drums from within the temple. And Steele had unpleasant memories of eery music by moonlight.

"What's that?" he demanded of the priest. Then he recognized the three-eight time of Indian music, utterly different from the tempo and five-note scale of Burmese musicians.

"A company of *nautch* * girls on their way to the Shan states," he replied. His gesture invited him to witness the rehearsal; and Steele, though in no mood for *nautch* dances, decided it would be good policy to humor the old fellow.

They followed him to the inner courtyard, where the strolling players were performing.

"By Allah, *sahib!*" declared the Afghan, as he eyed the slender, golden brown bodies swaying in the moonlit court, "these be finer game than those village girls."

Achmet was true to form.

"Nilofal and Nur Mahal," commented the priest. "Kashmiri dancing-girls. Perhaps my lord would be interested in a—ah, one might say, a private performance, at the bungalow."

Steele gave him the Burmese equivalent of "hell, no!"

Achmet, however, had been thinking rapidly.

"*Sahib,*" he interposed, "those lovely girls are in great peril from the *shaitan*-leopard. And those dogs from Hindustan"—his contemptuous gesture indicated the musicians—"would make no move to protect them. Nor the old priest either. They should be at camp where I could stand guard."

"Get out," ordered Steele.

"Or let me stay here and watch the temple for this excellent old priest," persisted the Afghan.

* East Indian professional dancing.

But Steele this time had a ready weapon: "While you were whispering sweet nothings to that Burmese girl, an assassin came near knifing me."

"*Billah!* My face is still blackened," the Afghan penitently admitted; but as he followed Steele, he cast covetous glances at Nilofal and Nur Mahal. Then he sighed and resigned himself to his master's uncommon whims.

As they headed back toward the teak camp, Steele noted the Afghan's thoughtful face, and wondered whether he was thinking of the King of Wizards or the unprotected Kashmiri girls.

"Kashmiri wins by a length," was his verdict as he seated himself at the table in his room.

He composed a letter to Powell, giving him a complete report. The situation was becoming tense, and Steele wanted further information as to Kirby. A skilful trainer of hunting-leopards, introduced into the camp by a rival teak company, and aided by native wizards, could completely demoralize the organization.

"Which is a damn sight more reasonable than *shaitan*-leopards," concluded Steele, as he added his signature to the letter that was to go to Rangoon in the morning. And Achmet, now more than ever determined to kill Kirby, would be just the man to act as runner. The following morning, however, Steele saw that his strategy had failed. Achmet was gone; and shortly after breakfast, Steele learned the cause of his desertion. One of the *mahouts* finally told him that the Afghan had set out on foot to seek the King of Wizards, determined to settle things, once for all.

WHEN Steele's wrath subsided, he philosophically decided that an Afghan is an Afghan, and sent a woodcutter with the message to Powell.

That afternoon brought a second upset, though one that was more welcome. Powell himself, riding a shaggy Shan pony, came ambling into camp.

"Your first letter set me thinking," he explained. "Your being nearly knifed at the Burmese village convinced me that the forest devils had human allies. So I looked up Kirby's references, and found out that they were faked. He was on the payroll of the Kokogon Teak Company until I put him in charge here—which entirely contradicts his story about working in the Pahang gold belt.

"And our friend Kirby will be dismissed at once. I'll manage this camp myself until a new man can come from Rangoon. In the meanwhile, you can be killing the leopard."

"Flattering as hell, Powell—unless the natives happen to be right about Kirby."

Powell eyed him narrowly, shook his head, and twisted his drooping, straw-colored mustache.

"The first thing I know, Steele, you'll be following Achmet to the village of the King of Wizards."

"Anyhow," countered Steele, "don't fire Kirby. Let's look into this a bit further."

They argued it back and forth for half an hour, but finally Steele's counsel prevailed. He maintained that dismissing Kirby would at the best be begging the question, and that the only way to restore order in the camp was to kill the *shaitan*-leopard.

For a week there were no depredations. The morale of the camp improved, and when Kirby realized that Powell had not come to dismiss him, relations between the three white men were less strained. Yet for all his assurance that Steele had not been undermining him, Kirby was far from cordial toward the American. Steele often caught the camp manager fixedly regarding him with a strange, appraising stare. He wondered whether Kirby still feared that he would report to Powell their conver-

sation the evening of the American's arrival at camp.

"I'm beginning to think," observed Powell one evening after dinner, "that you must have seriously wounded the beast the last time you encountered it, and it crawled away to die."

Steele shook his head. "I think the natives have been so scared that they're keeping under cover, so it can't grab any of them. I know I had my rifle lined right at it, but I'm just as sure that I didn't touch the beast. My guess is that as soon as the natives become careless again, we'll hear plenty."

"Maybe," was Kirby's ironic comment, "it waylaid your Afghan playmate and died of indigestion."

Powell saw the wrathful flash in Steele's eyes, and tried to change the subject.

"You know, we really ought to see a performance by those *nautch* dancers before they go north," he remarked. "I hear they're uncommonly talented."

As he spoke, Powell's glance included the American and Kirby.

"Thanks, but I'm going out to do a bit of bushwhacking tonight," Kirby answered. "It's about time for the beast to show up again."

They watched Kirby shoulder his rifle and set out on foot toward the *jeel*.

"By Heaven," muttered Powell, "I don't half blame the natives for feeling funny about Kirby. Quite aside from the expression of his face, did you ever see anyone that reminded you more of a cat? Just look at that stride—he even moves like one."

"Suppose," countered Steele, as he struck light to a cigar, "that *you* take a jaunt to the village of wizards."

And when Steele's cigar was down to its final inch, they sent a *mahout* to tell the old priest that they would presently be on hand to witness a performance.

"By Allah, *sahib*," rumbled a deep voice at the doorway, "now that I have returned, I will guard you and the manager *sahib* on the way to the temple."

Achmet, tattered, bedraggled, but triumphant, had returned. He wore his silver-hafted Khorassan tulwar; but as he spoke, he patted the butt of his service revolver. Before Steele could demand an accounting, the Afghan grinned amiably and explained, "As your honor doubtless knows, I went to see the King of Wizards, and got a charm to protect me against leopard *shaitans*. Furthermore, my revolver is loaded with silver bullets. And for good measure I have engraved on each one: *'I betake me to the Lord of the Daybreak for refuge against Shaitan, and against the evils of the night when it darkeneth'.*"

Steele, putting little trust in the hundred and thirteenth chapter of the Koran, even if engraved on a bullet, reached for his express rifle as he and Powell set out for the temple. But when they were only a little more than halfway to their destination, Steele knew that they would witness no performance that night. From the half-ruined heap came an agonized cry that was abruptly cut short. Then a confusion of yells, savage growls, and the wailing of a woman. And as they dashed toward the temple, Steel saw a monstrous leopard bounding from the terrace. It had seized one of the dancing-girls, and was dragging her into the jungle. He halted, fired a crackling volley at a streak of golden brown that was scarcely perceptible in the light of the waning moon; but it was a perilous shot as likely to kill the victim as the beast. There was a savage snarling, thrashing in the brush, then a blur of tawny, silken hide.

"You got him!" shouted Powell, as he followed.

"Then it's blind luck," panted Steele, as he approached the spot where the abandoned victim lay moaning. "I barely caught a flash of him."

The Kashmiri girl, mangled by the

beast's fangs, was beyond help. But as Steele knelt beside the pitiful remnant of loveliness, he heard a yell, and a rattle of pistol fire; then a crackling in the underbrush, and a wrathful, rasping volley of oaths. Steele leaped forward, rifle in hand. Powell and Achmet were at his heels. A dozen strides brought them through the thicket and into a small clearing. They saw Kirby emerging from its farther edge, pistol drawn in hand and stretching his long legs toward them. He was utterly out of breath, and it was not until they reached the body of the Kashmiri girl that he was able to explain.

"I was coming from the *jeel,* and I heard a shot. The first thing I knew the beast was on me, running as if the devil was after it. Knocked me end for end, but went on. It seemed as anxious to get away as I was, but I fired as it cleared me."

During Kirby's narrative, Achmet's sharp eyes covered him from head to foot. Kirby's shoulder was bleeding.

"Billahi, sahib," he whispered to Steele. "Verily, he is the *shaitan*-leopard. *Look where your shot grazed him!"*

"Shut up, you idiot," Steele growled; "that's a slash, not a bullet crease."

But he began pondering when the natives, mustering up enough courage to leave the temple, approached the group gathered about the body of the Kashmiri girl. One of them carried a spear, and its tip was dripping with blood. Someone, cornered and desperate, had struck at the marauder as he bounded out with his prey. And a lance-head would make a slash in passing!

6

STEELE and Achmet carried the remains of the Kashmiri girl back to the temple. There he learned that Nur Mahal, the other *nautch* dancer, had been badly clawed while trying to save her sister.

"Sahib," said the girl, whose dark eyes now blazed with wrath, "we were twins, born only an hour apart, and our destinies are closely interlaced. The beast will therefore return for me. There is no help for it, but before the evil stars of my horoscope reach the House of Death I will devise vengeance."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. Although Nur Mahal's argument was fairly sound astrology, it meant little to Steele; but she might suggest some device that had not thus far occurred to the hunters. The valley of Kashmir is infested with leopards, and the natives are unusually skilful in disposing of the beasts.

"It was ordained that the demon leopard would kill my sister," declared Nur Mahal, "and likewise, that he must kill me, since we were born so little apart. Therefore, he will seek me; and you may watch, and thus kill him. My fate is certain; so let me bait a trap, instead of using a young goat, as is the custom."

As she spoke, Nur Mahal's eyes shifted toward Kirby, who stood at the fringe of the crowd. Steele saw their eyes clash, and sensed the antagonism between the two. The girl was firmly convinced that Kirby was a leopard in human form; and he, in his turn, was wrathful because of the girl's unspoken accusation, and the muttering among the natives as they edged away from him.

"That's entirely too wild, Nur Mahal," countered Steele. "You're pretty badly scratched, and you'd better come to camp and get yourself doctored up a bit."

If infection set in, Nur Mahal's dire forebodings would be fulfilled without another attack by the leopard. The Kashmiri girl was being carried on by her nerve. Even as he spoke, she wavered on her feet. Steele caught her as she collapsed.

"You are right," asserted the old priest. "Take her, lest she die of those clawings."

His suggestion was eagerly echoed by

the natives. Nur Mahal's saying that her destiny was linked with that of her dead sister and that of the demon leopard made them eager to get her as far from them as possible.

They devised a rude litter. Powell and Achmet carried her to camp.

During the discussion, Kirby had wrathfully left the temple.

"My Heaven, Steele," muttered Powell, as they headed across the clearing, "it's all perfect rot, but Kirby has to leave here at once, or I won't have a logger or *mahout* left in camp."

"Better wait a while," temporized Steele. "This girl is in bad shape, but I think I can pull her through. That will prove that her astrology was all wrong, which will encourage the natives."

Powell conceded Steele's argument.

Halfway across the clearing, they saw Jang running toward them.

"Sahiban," he began, "you must not bring the girl to camp. The news has spread. All the woodcutters will leave at once. They are certain that she will draw an attack from the demon leopard."

Steele cursed heartily.

"What'll we do with her?" demanded Powell. "Jang is right. I didn't think of that."

"Build a shelter here near the edge of the clearing," suggested Achmet, "and I will run to camp and get the medicines and bandages for Steele *Sahib* to apply. I will help him guard this woman." Then he added, "Until Allah permits the *shaitan* leopard to eat her."

"Jang," demanded Steele as Achmet bounded across the clearing, "who the devil started this, anyhow?"

"Kirby *Sahib* heard the woodcutters' mutterings," answered Jang. "But as for me, I think that he gave them the thought, so that the girl would not be placed in a bungalow where he could not get her when he takes the shape of a leopard."

"You're crazy," growled Steele. "How can a man become a beast?"

"This is no true leopard," Jang stubbornly persisted. "In my native country there were many of them, but they were only nuisances, not a danger. We hunt them on foot—with a turban cloth wrapped around the left arm, to ward off their claws, while we take a *kukri* and slice them in half when they attack. Verily, this must be a demon, to be hunting men in such an unnatural manner."

That left Steele no argument. This beast was different from the vicious pests of Kashmir and Nepal.

While awaiting Achmet's return, Jang set to work with his *kukri,* chopping down bamboos and saplings to construct a shelter for the injured girl and her guardian. And presently Nur Mahal received first aid.

DESPITE Steele's efforts, infection set in. For three days and nights he was at his wits' end, trying to use his sketchy medical knowledge to save the Kashmiri girl. When she was not delirious, she stared at the matting wall of her shelter, fatalistically resigned to the beast's return.

Powell was in a high-grade funk. "If she dies, we're jolly well blown up. The camp depends on your proving that a first-aid kit can beat this devil leopard, even if a rifle can't."

Steele somberly shook his head. "She'd pull through if she weren't sold on the idea that her number is up. So she has absolutely no resistance, no will to hang on. For all the good it's done, my taking care of her, I might as well have been out bushwhacking. Better, perhaps. If I nailed the leopard, she'd be on her feet in an hour."

"Sahib," Achmet cut in, "if Nur Mahal dies, I will then and there kill Kirby, or may Allah do as much to me, and more."

The burly Afghan meant exactly what

he said. He was not blustering. He squatted on the ground, grimly fingering the hilt of his blade. That in no way lightened Steele's problem. Powell said, "You can't have that chap running around executing wizards. He's off his chump. I'm referring to Achmet, you understand. No doubt Kirby's a bit of a scoundrel, offering me forged credentials, but we can't have him butchered."

"Now, don't get tough with Achmet," Steele answered impatiently. "Not that I approve of his ideas any more than you do. But it wasn't so many years ago that fellows as smart as you are were burning witches—right in your home territory."

"Don't be absurd!" Powell snapped. "Couple of centuries ago, at least."

"Did you ever hear of the *Malleus Maleficarum?*" Steele persisted.

"No, and I'm sure I'd not want to. Who were they?"

"It was a book of instructions for detecting wizards, witches, and the like. Written in 1485——"

"Oh—of course. *Hammer of Evildoers.*" Powell had unraveled the title. "Beastly stuff, Latin. Strike me dead, but I could do with such a hammer in this camp. What about the blasted book? Filthy superstition, for an educated person."

Steele rubbed his chin. He eyed the restless girl, the Afghan who crouched like a beast ready to spring, and the harassed manager. "Powell," he went on finally, "there is something filthy in this jungle, but I'm not so sure it's superstition. The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*——"

"Collaboration, eh?" Powell was gnawing his mustaches.

"Right. Two priests. Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. I remember hearing quite a bit of one of their chapters quoted. About human beings that could assume animal forms——"

"By Jove!" Powell snapped to his feet. He choked, blinked. "Now you give me this blighted rot! I sent you out here to kill a leopard, not explain him. I—I—why——"

"What I meant was," Steele cut in, "that you mustn't be too impatient with Achmet—when people of our own race had similar notions, not so long ago, as history goes. Suppose you trot along and get some sleep, old fellow."

He took Powell's elbow, and edged him toward the door. At the threshold, he added in a whisper, "And keep an eye on Kirby. Don't tell him Achmet is making threats, but persuade him to quit his prowling around. It'd be awkward if this red-bearded ruffian did go off his chump!"

"Beastly awkward," Powell muttered as he stalked from the hut.

The tall Afghan moved from the foot of Nur Mahal's cot and toward the door. *"Sahib,"* he said, "now that these sons of wild pigs are gone, I will tell thee something. Be of good cheer. As long as you watch here, I also watch, and I shall slay no one as long as you are busy attending to her wounds as you once did mine."

Steele sighed. He was considerably relieved. "That's fine, Achmet."

"Later, there will be enough time to do that which is to be done," the Afghan explained.

7

ANOTHER devil-haunted Burmese night, when every furtive stirring and twittering outside the hut frayed Steele's nerves. He was still watching beside the *nautch* girl's cot. A kerosene flare cast a flickering yellowish light on her immobile features. Every other resource having failed, Steele had administered opiates to blot out Nur Mahal's delirium.

Fear, rather than fever induced by infection, was the danger. If he could keep her from worrying herself to death, her natural vitality would have a chance. Her

sister's fate, much more than her own injuries, held Nur Mahal's life in the balance.

Steele was nodding from weariness. He had been guarding a secret from Powell, and most of all from Achmet, who still squatted in the doorway. Only the haggard American had gotten a close look at Nur Mahal. He was no longer entirely certain that leopard claws and fangs had caused her wounds. The other victim, beyond any help, had been turned over to those who laid out the dead; the *nautch* girl was the first one to receive close scrutiny.

Steele had long since forgotten the difference between being asleep and awake. Nur Mahal, unevenly divided between terror and opium, was beginning to make him wonder what difference there was between life and death. And thinking of those curious wounds had ended by making him doubt whether more than a hair divided man and beast.

He cursed that treacherous memory which had exhumed the sense if not the exact words of Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. His first verdict on the opinions of the two German priests had been, "Wretched superstition!" Bit by bit he modified that to, "Logical, but impossible." And now he not only admitted the logic, but failed to deny the possibility.

Burma had been getting under his skin. The uncounted millions of malignant *nats*, the sorcerers who peopled the forest, the tattooed symbols the natives wore to counteract the oppression of Thagyâ-Min, Lord of Demon-Land: these things became increasingly real to Steele during his long vigil beside Nur Mahal. He told himself that oft-repeated suggestions were poisoning his mind. Then he asked himself, "But what suggested these things to the natives?"

The answer was remorseless enough: Burma and her breathing soil.

He started, jerked violently, and sat upright. Nur Mahal was stirring. As the opiate wore off, she murmured uneasily. Her thin hands, almost transparent in the light, rose in a clawing gesture. He could not understand what she said; he was not even sure that it was in Hindustani.

Steele fumbled for a cigarette. He had none. He glanced toward the door. The big Afghan no longer crouched at the entrance.

"Achmet!" He listened, heard no stirring outside, nor any reply. He raised his voice. "Achmet!"

The Afghan was beyond earshot, or he would have answered. His revolver lay on a packing-case near the door. It was loaded with the hand-cast silver bullets. He had apparently left his master a charmed weapon to take the place of the rifle which had so consistently failed.

And there was another inference: Achmet's pent-up wrath and fear had sent him out to settle Kirby.

The camp was beyond hailing distance. Steele could not abandon his patient for long enough to get in touch with Powell. He was trembling, not from any ordinary fear, but from a premonition. He began to feel that this eery drama was marching to a climax; that one careless move would undo all his work. But it would be almost as bad, if Achmet ran amuck and cut Kirby to pieces. Stolid, plodding British law would show the loyal fellow no consideration.

Steele reached for his rifle. He stepped out into the chilly mists of the jungle. The moon was clearing the treetops that fringed the clearing. The night had become a whirl of silver glamor and deception. No small animals made any disturbance, nor did any birds cry out or twitter. Strangely, the murmuring forest had become a tomb tenanted by a haggard man, and a girl who wavered between life and death.

Steele raised the heavy weapon to his

shoulder. He fired one barrel, and as the clearing's farther side threw back the blast, he cut loose with the second charge. That would arouse Powell and the whole camp, and interfere with Achmet's plans.

The spare cartridges were on the improvised table, near Nur Mahal's cot. This was hardly more than three strides, but Steele had no chance to reload. The matting wall of the hut parted, and the spotted slayer entered. The beast flowed through the breach, and into the room.

FOR an instant they faced each other. The leopard snarled, and its tail lashed slowly. Its silken hide rippled, and its phosphorescent eyes radiated malevolence beyond that of any animal. From long experience with hunters, the beast knew that the rifle was empty; thus it was no longer necessary to wait for the watcher to doze. The only problem now was to take the choice of victims.

Steele was far heavier than the undersized Burmese the brute had carried away, or the frail *nautch* girl. In that instant of appraisal, he sensed what the leopard's choice would be. As the great cat whirled toward the cot, Steele snatched Achmet's revolver. He had to move too fast for any chance of aim.

The blast shook the flimsy shelter. Steele moved as in a nightmare in which time had ceased. Only split seconds had passed since he emptied the express rifle. Powell and his men would scarcely be on the way. It would all be over before they arrived.

The leopard wheeled from Nur Mahal. Any other of its kind would have fled, since a way of retreat was open; but Satan in a spotted coat had come to Kokogon, and Steele's blazing weapon had not yet left his hip when the beast lunged. This would be hand to hand. Whether or not he riddled the beast, the long fangs and raking claws would finish him.

He flung himself aside and thrust out the heavy revolver to ward off the attack. If that first leap missed, he had a chance.

The leopard shouldered Steele off balance, just as he jerked another shot. The barrel burst, half blinding him with flecks of burning powder. Achmet's hand-loaded cartridges had kicked back, leaving the gunner stunned and unarmed, the useless butt and warped breech mechanism in his bleeding hand.

The leopard, missing its victim, flashed in a silken arc through the doorway. Steele did not see it land and whirl, ready to close in again. He had snatched the rifle and was bounding toward the cartridges on the little table. Whether his trembling hands could shove them into the breech in time was an open question.

Then he heard a yell. Still fumbling with the shells, Steele sidestepped, facing the doorway. The crouching leopard's leap was checked before it fairly began. An arc of frosty metal blazed in the moonglow, and something dark dropped from the tree near the hut. It masked some of the beast's body.

There was a terrific snarling, a man's guttural voice, and the rise and fall of a blade. Achmet, dropping from overhead, had struck with his tulwar. As he hacked, he cried above the *chunk* of steel biting flesh, "I split him from end to end, *sahib!* Yea, the slayer and spoiler is slain!"

A huddle of fur twitched in a spreading pool of blood. Steele was dazed and trembling. In the distance, he heard shouting: Powell, and the chatter of natives aroused by the firing.

"Your silver bullets nearly finished me! The next time you load any cartridges, don't ram the slugs too tight. Not with smokeless powder, you big ape. That's a different matter from the kind you fellows use back home. But what were you doing up in that tree?"

The Afghan wiped his tulwar on his baggy trousers. "I hid there, *sahib,* know-

ing that you would presently call me. And when I did not answer, you would begin shouting 'damn,' after the fashion of the infidels, saving your honor's presence. Then the *shaitan*-leopard would know you were alone, and when he attacked——"

"Nice," said Steele, "except that he slipped from the rear, and nearly finished me before you got into action. But it worked, and——"

Then he saw Achmet's change of expression. His glance followed the Afghan's gesture. "Look—*ya chahar yar!* O Four Companions of the Holy Prophet! The demon leopard is becoming a man!"

STEELE stood there and watched it happen. He could not speak. He could only stare. The blood-splashed tawny body was becoming tenuous and misty. He could almost see through it. Its shape was altering, as though a figure of sea foam were slowly collapsing. When the dissolution was complete, he would know what was dark and solid beneath that thinning phantom shape.

Shrubbery crashed, torches flared. Powell and a dozen natives came on the run. "I say, what's all the shooting?" Then he saw Steele's face and Achmet's gesture, and the thing that lay on the red ground. Powell licked his lips and stuttered. "By Jove! The leopard. But it's collapsing. Like a blasted omelette, if you know what I mean."

Achmet was saying, "I betake me to the Lord of the Daybreak for refuge against Satan the Stoned! It is not a leopard, but a man!"

He was right. Kirby, slashed and stabbed, was now plain. He groaned and twisted. His lips were curled back in a snarl that showed his white teeth. Some incredible vitality still kept him alive. But the illusion of tawny fur and spots still persisted. That was what sickened Steele; he did not know whether this was a beast to be put out of its misery, or a human being who should get the last vain assistance which his own kind could render.

"Kirby!" Powell muttered, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

A snarl. A shudder. The phosphorescent eyes glazed. And as a match flame winking out, the last trace of illusion faded. The natives fled, screeching, now that their suspicions were confirmed. Dead or alive, a wizard is a fearsome thing. Achmet would have done the same, but if the *sahibs* could stand fast, so could he. But he muttered.

Finally Powell said, "Ghastly! Simply can't believe it, but there it was. Glad I saw it happen. If you'd told me this, I'd have been forced to conclude your man Achmet had made good his threat. That you were—ah—lying to save his hide."

Steele nodded and said nothing. Powell had to have reasons; what had happened upset all his convictions. He demanded, "How do you account for it? Why couldn't anyone kill it until now? Speak up, man! Blast it, you were telling me something about a chap named Sprenger, and another one, Kramer—here, the other night."

"So I was. Kirby himself dropped a hint the first day I arrived, though he probably wasn't aware of it. He told me that last season he aroused antagonism among some of the native wizards by felling a sacred tree which blocked a runway leading from the forest to the creek.

"But no one will ever know just how the wizards put a curse on Kirby, to make him prowl around at night and become a leopard."

"Curse!" Powell had to deny himself any admissions that would confirm what he had seen. "A leopard's body and bones can't become those of a man, and then change back again."

Steele smiled and made a helpless gesture. "Possibly not. What I mean is that what we saw was not actually leopard form.

We saw Kirby, and his beast-personality was uppermost, so strongly that its impact made us for the moment visualize a leopard. Those priests, Iacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, as I was on the verge of telling you the other night, suggested that the transformation of human to animal is only apparent, because of a spell laid upon the eyes of all beholders."

"Ah—you mean, this poor devil's obsession was so strong that we joined him in believing? Like a bally hypnotist's suggestion?"

"That's as close to it as we can ever come," Steele answered. "And it likewise hints at the reason for my rotten shooting. A lot of it doubtless was nerves, the uncanniness of everything shaking me in spite of myself. Then again, Kirby might not have been on all fours. But with the leopard image so deeply burned into me, I thought I saw a crouching beast, and fired accordingly. So I drove the bullets between his knees, for instance."

Powell frowned, nodded, and muttered something about hypnotism. Having a definition put him more at ease. Then he looked up and demanded, "But this Afghan chap? Very successful."

"When he dropped from the tree, milling that tulwar, he covered more ground than any number of bullets. Regardless of posture or illusion, Kirby could not avoid being slashed. And Kirby, I think, could not have been conscious of what he did by night. The poor devil was the most bewildered and harassed of us all, when he shook off the leopard obsession and became himself."

Powell tugged at his mustaches. "Those blasted Burmese wizards!" he muttered, uneasily.

Then he said, "Nice work, old chap. I mean, your man Achmet seems to have qualified for the reward. Frightfully embarrassing, putting it that way, but he was swinging the tulwar, you know."

Steele sighed. "I'm glad I didn't win. With the way it turned out, I couldn't accept it. Perhaps Kirby did have some underhanded reason for offering you forged credentials, but God knows, he didn't plan to become anything like that."

They turned to tell the tall Afghan that he had earned more rupees than any of his clan had seen in generations; but Achmet was no longer standing by. He was in the hut, kneeling beside the *nautch* girl.

"El hamdulilahi!" he was muttering. "Praise be to Allah, the fever is gone and Satan the Stoned has flown away."

She was still unconscious, but he would be there when the opiate lost its hold.

Powell said to Steele, "Lucky beggar, that chap. Seems as though he'll be collecting a double reward."

Mortmain

BY SEABURY QUINN

A peculiar tale of a beautiful Russian vampire from Manchukuo—a ch'ing shih—who could not sleep quiet in her grave, and could not be given a true death by the stake

RANLEIGH looked up, puzzled, as the mellow radio-chime of the mortuary's doorbell boomed its triple-note of warning. One might expect a 'phone call half an hour after midnight, but who would ring the bell at this time? He was alone in the office, for it was Jim Atherholt's evening off and Basset, his junior assistant, had gone to the corner for sandwiches and coffee. Burglars generally shun funeral homes, but . . . he took the pistol from his desk drawer and dropped it in the pocket of his well-cut oxford-gray jacket as he rose to answer the summons which was sounding again, insistently, irritably, as though the caller kept his finger on the bell button.

In the coned-down light of the porch lamp he descried a figure muffled to the ears in upturned collar, caught the glint of beaver fur on the visitor's overcoat, and appraised the stylish Homburg hat. His fingers relaxed on the pistol grip. The caller might be mysterious, but he was obviously no burglar.

"Good evening—ah, good evening, Mr. Steadman!" he greeted as he snapped off the latch and drew the door back. "Come in, please." Then, as his visitor stepped into the lobby he stood waiting, brows raised politely in interrogation. Doctors, lawyers and morticians are denied the layman's right to give way to their curiosity; the cardinal rule of their callings is to maintain a poker face, whatever their impulses may be. "It's very cold," he hazarded. There was always safety in banalities, they gave the caller time to catch his mental breath.

Steadman ignored the remark, as Ranleigh had expected. But the rejoinder he shot back was entirely unlooked for: "I'd like to see some caskets. Right away."

For a fraction of a second Ranleigh's carefully maintained calm faltered. Ninety patrons out of every hundred began conversation with the announcement that some relative or friend was dead. The other ten announced superfluously that they wished to make arrangements for a funeral. Albert Steadman, always poised, assured and self-possessed, asked to look at caskets—"some caskets"—as if he shopped for a new car or motorboat or some entirely ordinary piece of merchandize.

Then experience triumphed over surprise. "Certainly, Mr. Steadman," he answered blandly. This way, if you please."

Ranleigh looked upon his caskets much as a dentist regards dentures and bridges, tangible and visible accessories to service, but the least important of the things he had for sale. Each casket in his display room bore a neatly-lettered card announcing it was furnished in conjunction with a complete funeral service. It was not priced separately; indeed, it was not priced at all, any more than are the buttons on a suit or ornaments upon a lady's dress in a depart-

"Ko'en Cheng kept her bound in a cellar, reciting charms and incantations over her."

ment store. But Steadman asked to look at caskets. Probably a layman's inept statement of his wishes, but . . . "Give him time to get adjusted, let him get hold of himself," Ranleigh warned himself as he switched the lights of his display room on.

In the indirect glow of the torches Steadman looked about him. Here were caskets made of metal, silver finished, or with the dull gleam of bronze or copper; cases of mahogany, beautiful as furniture designed by master-craftsmen; caskets covered with fine, rich brocades—"This one," Steadman announced shortly, stopping by a case of pale silver-bronze satin lining. "How much?"

Ranleigh glanced at the price card, not that his memory needed refreshing, but to gain time. "A service with that particular casket would be six hundred and fifty dollars, unless——"

"I want no services; I want that casket, just as it is, and right away. How much, man?"

"We don't usually price our caskets separately, Mr. Steadman," Ranleigh began. "Easy on, Gordon," he thought, "this man's not hysterical with grief, there's something more here; if he isn't crazy. . . ."

"Never mind your usual practise," Steadman jerked back. "It's imperative I have this casket—immediately. How much'll you take for it?"

Ranleigh temporized, edging toward the door. "If you could give me some idea whom you want it for—that's a lady's casket, entirely unsuitable for a man, or even an elderly woman. . . ."

With apparent effort Steadman brought his twitching features under control. "I want this casket—this particular casket," he replied, with slow emphasis upon each word, like one who speaks to a foreigner or a person handicapped by deafness, "and I want it delivered to me as soon as possible; sometime tomorrow, surely. I don't want it for a funeral, I just want it in my house—I must have it. You've served my family, and you know me. I've come to you because I know and trust you. I can't buy a casket direct from a wholesale house, but if you won't sell me this one there are other undertakers who will——" He broke off, drawing out his billfold.

When he spoke like this he seemed sane enough, and there was certainly nothing abnormal in the sheaf of bills he handled, except their number and denominations. "Will you take six hundred dollars for this coffin just as it stands, without services or anything else, except delivery?" He laid twelve fifty-dollar bills upon the casket's gleaming top.

Ranleigh nodded. After all, as Steadman said, there were other funeral directors . . . and six hundred dollars was six hundred dollars. "What inscription on the name plate?" he asked.

"None. But be sure you have this coffin at my house before sunset tomorrow. Good night, Mr. Ranleigh."

THE odd transaction preyed on Ranleigh's mind all next day. During his direction of three funerals and arrangements for two more the memory of Albert Steadman's distrait manner and his strange insistence that he needed a casket immediately hovered in the back of his mind. Several times he decided to send a check to Steadman with a note advising he could not make delivery of a casket in such circumstances; once he actually drew out his checkbook, but with his pen poised he paused and rationalized the sale. Steadman's manner had seemed strange, but what right had Ranleigh to say that he was crazy? How many of us could escape incarceration if eccentric actions branded us as lunatics? Almost every day you read about the death of some unusual character who had kept a casket in his house for years—Sarah Bernhardt had been so ob-

sessed with thoughts of death that she took a specially-selected casket on her world tours with her. "Don't be a fool," he told himself. "If Steadman wants that casket, sell it to him, or someone else will. He surely seemed to know what he was about." Still, to take advantage of a crazy man, or even one whose judgment had been warped by grief, was not the way that Gordon Ranleigh did things. He could have retired on the profits he'd passed up when he kept his patrons from incurring funeral bills beyond their means. Then back again his thoughts swung in the vicious spiral: Was Steadman crazy? . . . who was he to judge?

A feeling of vague unease oppressed him as the highway reeled away beneath his whirling hearse wheels. Entirely devoid of superstition, especially concerning death, he still felt slightly "creepy" on this errand of delivering a casket for which no corpse waited. The roadway, smooth and gray as a steel ribbon, ran between tall stands of pine trees, and it seemed to Ranleigh that there was an air of hidden menace, or at least of warning, in the long blue shadows that they threw. Far away the hills were indigo that shaded into purplish-black. The sun was going down behind them and little bits of frayed-out clouds of cotton-wool began to tinge themselves with lavender and golden-pearl, with here and there a fleeting glow of sunset-flame. Somehow, it seemed to him, the pine trees evoked from their depths primeval spirits, elementals menacing and hostile; their black boughs did not seem to whisper with the soft and friendly rustle he had always associated with evergreens, but, gaunt, lonely and aloof, they stretched their dark limbs upward, as if to share dark secrets with the darkling sky. From the dooryard of a cabin which stood in the center of a patch of brown cleared land a dog howled mournfully, and the ululating echo of its lamentation rolled back eerily from the hills, then died abruptly, snuffed out by the smothering weight of wooded shadows.

He glanced up at the sinking sun, then at his speedometer. Steadman had been emphatic in his request that the casket be delivered before sunset. He notched his throttle forward a little. How much farther was it to Mortmain Manor?

Funny name that, Mortmain. A lawyer friend had told him it came from the Latin, meaning a dead hand, and signified a permanently entailed estate. A Steadman in Colonial days had tried to make it impossible for his heirs to sell the homestead, and though the courts had overturned the will, the Steadmans still lived on the property, and the place was known as Mortmain. "Dead Hand House," a devilish uncanny name.

Idly, he reconstructed Albert Steadman's history. His was the tenth generation to occupy Mortmain, and unless he remarried and had children, he would be the last. Like his father and his grandfather he had been a banker, but unlike them he had practised his profession abroad. Financial adviser to South American and small Balkan countries, traveling in the Near and Far East, going anywhere and everywhere his advice could be marketed, he had lived most of his life in foreign lands, coming home for only fleeting visits till his father's death called him to the presidency of the Sixth National Bank. And when he returned after five years' stay in Harbin he brought a Russian bride with him, Natacha Kovalchuk, a White refugee from the revolution.

She was a riddle-woman, enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's smile, tall, slender, fair-skinned, red-haired, with a far-off vision in her green eyes, as though she had looked long upon the sufferings of the hidden places of the world. Slow grace personified, she was making every movement in the manner of a silky, lithesome cat.

Ranleigh had been close to her only twice: once when she came with Steadman to arrange for setting up a monument above his father's grave. She had disturbed him. Her white face framed between the darkly lustrous sable of her coat and the gleaming fur of her tall Cossack hat had reminded him of something he could not recall for a moment; then he placed it with a sudden inward qualm—the face of a girl he had helped take from the river, a pale drowned face with seaweed tangled in its unbound, floating hair. And there was something secret in her long green eyes, something half sardonic, half inviting, as if to say, "You think you know the mystery of death, my little man? How bold—and droll—you are!" He had felt relieved when she left with her husband.

The second time he saw her he was called professionally. Steadman was somewhere in the interior of Mexico and could not be communicated with, but Musya, the old half-breed Tartar woman who had come with Natacha as nurse and lady's maid, made all arrangements. "The *gaspadin** must understand these were milady's wishes: She is to be dressed in this green gown, with this underwear, these stockings and these shoes. Musya is to braid her hair; these rings shall be put on her fingers, these in her ears. Her casket must be silver-bronze with écru satin lining, and the plate upon it shall bear but the single word 'Natacha'."

She had been beautiful—and disturbing—in death as in life. She did not look dead when he came for her—she looked merely tired, and sad. Lying in her great four-poster bed, with silk sheets pulled up to her throat and her hands at rest upon the counterpane, there was no look of death about her, no half-closed, glassy-staring eyes, no fallen jaw, no flaccid, sagging muscles. It was simply as if she were grieving for herself, sorrowing at being cut off from the world she loved, yet not too sorrowful at leaving it. Her cheeks were hollow and her red lips had a tragic downward curve; yet somehow her calm countenance reminded him of a mask, aloof and serene, yet curiously, even frighteningly, watchful . . . as though she looked from beneath lowered lids and saw all that occurred.

He carried out instructions to the final letter and the last small comma. Acting on the suggestion of the doctor he took her body to his funeral home and had services in his chapel. There were no relatives nor any intimate friends, for Steadman and his wife had lived almost entirely to themselves, but some of Steadman's business associates and their wives came to the funeral and viewed the pale and lovely corpse with something of the emotions the living woman inspired.

In the course of long experience Gordon Ranleigh had become an expert in embalming. None knew better than he how to simulate the look of life upon the dead, but this case needed little help from him. It was incredible how beautiful and how life-like she appeared. Couched on the écru satin of the casket lining, clothed in the long and closely clinging robe of Nile green, she lay with her head turned a little to the side, and soft black lashes swept her flawless cheeks so naturally it seemed that any moment they would rise and show the gleaming emerald of her eyes. One hand lay loosely on her breast, the fingers slightly curved as if in quiet sleep; the other rested by her side, and in it, by Musya's directions, she held a purple orchid with a scarlet center. In the flickering gleam of candelabra placed at the casket's head and foot, it seemed as if her bosom rose and fell in light slumber. When the services were finished and the time for final leave-taking arrived, they stood and stared at her, those bankers, lawyers, merchants and their women, as if

* Gentleman (Russian).

they could not believe it was a dead woman they saw. Those slim-red-tipped white fingers, those tiny satin-encased feet . . . it seemed impossible that they were now forever quiet with the quietness of death.

They buried her in Oakdale Park, opening a grave in Steadman's family plot, but they put no tombstone over her. Time enough for that when he came back from Mexico. Old Musya pottered round the place for several days, planting a wild rose bush at the grave head, sowing little spiny seeds in the fresh turf. Then she disappeared and it was not until they found her hanging by her scrawny neck from an oak tree in Mortmain Manor park that people realized how great her grief for her dead mistress was.

She had no relatives, no friends, no money. Steadman's friends refused to pledge his credit or assume responsibility for her funeral. "Let the county bury her. That's what we pay taxes for." But Ranleigh took the poor old twisted body to his place, embalmed it, dressed it in a decent robe, put it in a cheap—but not a pauper's—casket, and buried it in a grave which he bought with his own funds.

Now his thought swung back to Steadman. What prompted him to buy a casket? What possible use could he have for— A red light swinging in the darkening roadway called him from the profitless task of attempting to rationalize the irrational. Behind the warning lantern was a wooden barrier striped vividly in black and white diagonals and supporting a stenciled announcement:

BRIDGE OUT AHEAD
Detour by Way of Roylston Road

Jammed in the highway by the barricade were two vehicles, one from Maison Blanche, the fashionable women's outfitters, the other from the Murray Laboratories. Gears ground protestingly as drivers backed and reversed, stopped to twist steering-wheels with savage force, then edged their cars across the macadam and back again, jockeying for turning-room in the narrow road.

"Where you goin', buddy?" called the Maison Blanche chauffeur as he brought his vehicle about and rested for a moment with his clutch in neutral.

"Out to Mortmain, fifteen miles th' other side o' Gawd knows where," the laboratory driver answered. "This would have to happen to me with a date tonight at eight, an' orders to git this blood out there before th' sun goes down. Before sundown, hell! I know that Roylston Road. Be lucky if I git out there by nine o'clock. My girl frien'll think I stood her up, sure as shootin', and——"

"You're tellin' me!" the other interrupted. "My supper'll be as cold as a dead baby's nose, time I git home, an' my old woman'll give me hell. Can you beat it? This here now Steadman blows inter th' place 'bout three o'clock an' orders enough stuff for a glammer gal's debutt, sayin' it's all gotta be delivered to his house before sunset. It wuz amost four by th' time they gits it boxed and through th' shippin'-room an' tags me wid it. 'Git it out there before sunset,' they tells me—an' th' sun goes down by five o'clock these days. I coulda made it, at that, if this dam' bridge wuzn't out."

RANLEIGH drew his funeral car to the extreme edge of the road, making passage room for the other two, then, backing skilfully, brought his vehicle about and started toward the detour. No longer blue, but dark-green in the fading light, a wave-like barrier of hills obscured the horizon. It was through them his road led, almost ten miles of steady climb, with curves and switch-backs which increased the distance almost half. Much of it would have to be negotiated in second

gear and the possibility of reaching Mortmain by sunset was nil. But to a practised driver like him the work was purely mechanical, like walking. This left his thoughts free—to race helter-skelter back and forth, like rats chased by a terrier.

Almost desperately he fumbled with the facts, trying to reduce them to coherent design. He had a feeling the solution was in reach of his brain if he could only find the key; somewhere in all this jumble of irrationality was the missing integer, the jigsaw-puzzle piece which would give relevancy to the rebus. With increasing perplexity he rehearsed the clues: Albert Steadman, widower, buys a casket, selecting from a roomful of exhibits one almost identical to that in which his wife had been buried. Next day he orders lady's clothing in sufficient quantity and variety for, as the chauffeur put it, "a glammer gal's debutt." Both orders must be delivered before sundown. Aside from the requirement of immediate delivery, such divergent purchases are enough to excite wonder, but there is the added mystery of the order from the Murray Laboratories. Largest dealers in biologicals in the city, they are often sought in emergency by hospitals whose blood banks have run low or when blood donors cannot be found immediately. With them he places a rush order for blood, and it, like the casket and the clothes, must be brought to his house by sundown.

Blood — casket — clothing. Casket — clothing—blood, the absurdly ill-assorted combination rang and echoed through his puzzled mind as he breasted the long climb through the hills. Where was there—where could there be—a connection between these things? And why must all be delivered before the sun went down?

MORTMAIN MANOR stood upon a hilltop, four-square to the elements, sound and sturdy as it had been on the day Colonial artizans laid their saws and hammers by and repaired to the great hall to receive their final pay and drink the health of His Majesty George II. Sixty feet from earth to eaves its brick walls reared, stained and mellowed with the rains of two hundred summers, scarred and bitten with the snows and frosts of a bicentenary of winters. Against the bricks tall pilasters of gray stone mounted to the support of a crenellated cornice; the roof was tiled with scales of sheet-lead; the door was wide and high enough to let a coach-and-four through.

A high wall fenced the front yard, green with lichen; broken flagstones made a path to the low porch before the massive iron-strapped and spike-knobbed door. As Ranleigh turned into the gateway he heard the grinding of gears and a quartet of sharp beams stabbed through the darkness as the drivers of the two delivery wagons flashed their headlights on, lashing out at the gloom that seemed gathering like a pool inside the walled garden. They slid past him down the graveled drive and he drew up at the doorway, backing till his hearse doors overhung the low porch, then jumping down to set his casket truck in place and easing the long burial case along the rollers in the hearse floor till with a light bump it rested on the wheeled conveyor. Everything in readiness, he turned and drew the verdigris-stained knocker back and hammered on the door.

Steadman answered his summons, so quickly that it seemed he must have been waiting by the door. "I know, the bridge is out," he forestalled Ranleigh's apology. "Never mind, I dare say you came as quickly as you could. Wheel it this way, please." It was characteristic of him that he made no tender of assistance.

Time-stained wainscot rose three floors to a beamed ceiling in the entrance hall, a wide stair curved up at the rear, letting

out on balconies with heavy balustrades of carved oak at second and third story levels. The red glow from a massive fireplace flowed across the tiles of a wide hearth, and from antique chandeliers of cut glass gas flames flared, for Mortmain Manor lacked both electricity and telephone, and trusted to its carbide gas plant for cooking-fuel and lighting. But if the lighting-plant were late Victorian, the furnishings were elegantly Georgian. Deep mahogany bookshelves hoarded rows of calf and morocco bindings; a grand piano flashed back highlights from the chandeliers; underfoot were rugs from China, India and Persia; from small cabinets came the muted glow of purple, blue and mulberry Ming porcelain. Only wealth could have such things; only wealth assisted by good taste would choose them.

Following in his host's steps, Ranleigh wheeled the casket to a curtained doorway, paused a moment while the other drew the hangings back, then with an effort forced the wheeled bier across the doorsill. It was a large, beautiful room. The rosewood-paneled walls were rubbed with oil until they gleamed like satin; the brightly waxed oak floor was spread with Isphahan prayer rugs so precious that to walk on them seemed desecration. Between twin cut-glass gas brackets a Sheraton lowboy was placed, and on it had been put a set of toilet accessories, little crystal flacons of perfume, small porcelain pots of rouge, face powders with their lamb's wool puffs in silver-topped containers of etched glass, nail polish, combs of tortoise-shell and brushed with rich silver backs. Récamier chaise-longue upholstered in Nile-green satin brocade was flanked by two low chairs of gilded applewood. It was a lady's boudoir, elegant and lovely as a jewel case waiting for the gem it should enfold, a dainty, tasteful apartment, feminine as a ruffle or a hairpin; yet somehow, somewhere, Ranleigh's instinct told him, was a note of discord—something only very little out of harmony, like dark lipstick on a blond, or a soprano who sang slightly flat, yet which spoiled the perfection of the ensemble. What was it, something lacking . . . something just a little overdone? He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there.

"Put it right here, please," Steadman's order broke his rumination. Then, as he wheeled the casket into place—"where the bed should be," he thought—his host gave way to an annoyed ejaculation. "The devil! I should have thought of that!"

"What is it?" Ranleigh countered. "Something missing?"

"Yes, I forgot to get a stand for it. Too heavy to stand on a table or chairs; don't want it on the floor—see here, sell me that wheeled bier of yours, will you?"

Ranleigh considered. He had several church trucks, and a replacement could be obtained in a few days. This one had cost him forty dollars. Figuring the inconvenience he might be put to while he waited for a new one, a fair price would be——

"Sixty dollars cover it? Of course, I don't know anything about your prices, but if that's not enough——" Steadman paused and raised his brows interrogatively.

"Yes, I'll take that for it," responded Ranleigh. He was beginning to be nettled. People came to him in trouble, and he prided himself on ability to soothe their hurts, make the pain of bereavement less heart-rending. Steadman had been brusk from first to last, barking orders at him, treating him almost as if he were a menial. Now he seemed intent on hurrying him away; there would have been no more compulsion in a physical push than there was in his urgent, impatient manner.

Again his thought was interrupted by the other's fretful, eager voice. "Have to give you a check. That all right?"

"That will be quite satisfactory, Mr. Steadman," Ranleigh answered, annoyance whetting a slight edge on his voice.

STEADMAN crossed the hall and sat down at a kneehole desk that must have been an heirloom when Washington and Jefferson were lads, rummaging through the drawer a moment for his checkbook. Ranleigh dropped into a chair and bent his head in thought. Odd, Steadman's answering the door; when he'd been there before there'd been a houseman and a chambermaid-cook. Where were they now? It was out of character for Steadman to serve himself. . . . That room where he had left the casket . . . what was wrong with it? Something in its composition jarred his sense of propriety, but what? By George! Involuntarily, he snapped his fingers softly. Cataloging the furniture in his mind he'd stumbled on the key. There were no mirrors—not even a hand-glass—in the place. What sort of boudoir was it that lacked mirrors? What woman ever made her toilet without benefit of looking-glass? Odd oversight, that. Or was it an oversight?

Pondering, he glanced across the rug-set floor, and leaned forward with a smile. Stepping soundlessly on dainty feet came a blue-point Siamese cat toward him. He liked cats. Comfortable, homey brutes. There were seldom less than four or five around his house, for Lady Jane, his Maltese tabby, was unalterably opposed to race suicide. "Here, puss!" he whispered in the voice he reserved for his special pets. "Pretty pussy!"

The cat dropped to its belly eight or ten feet from him, ears pricked alertly forward, green eyes fixed in a stare. Yet they did not stare at him. As far as he was concerned, they seemed to notice nothing, but to be fixed levelly upon some object just behind him. He became aware of a slight irritation just above his collar, as if the short hair on his neck were rising. It was uncanny, eery, this being stared through by an animal.

For a moment he sat at a loss, then stretched a hand in invitation to the cat. "Nice kitty—pretty puss!" he wheedled. The hard eyes gleamed in the gaslight, unrecognizing, unseeing; then the beast rose to its padded feet and turned toward the room where the casket stood, stalking off with the light graceful gait of its tribe and never a backward look.

"Here you are," he heard Steadman say, and turned with something like a start to see the freshly blotted check extended toward him. There was no breeze, no air that stirred sufficiently to make the gas flames waver, but the check was quivering as if a strong wind ruffled it. Steadman's hand was trembling as with palsy, and around his lips there was a tightening of the muscles that spelled but one thing—fear. The man was bordering on panic, almost hysterical with haste and wild desire to be rid of him.

"Thank you," Ranleigh murmured as he rose to put the folded check into his pocket. "I'm sorry I was delayed by——" His partially expressed apology faded on his lips as if his voice had come through a radio and the dial had been abruptly turned.

For the curtains at the boudoir doorway parted, and framed between their iridescent folds a woman stood. Her gown of Nile-green silken tissue hung loosely from her lissome form, no more concealing the perfection of her ivory body than a passing wisp of cumulus cloud hides the disk of the full moon. The rich luxuriance of her burnished-copper hair, unbound and smoothly parted in the middle, swept like a cloven cascade down her high white forehead and swirled like sun-flecked flowing water round her bare white shoulders. About her incredibly slender waist was clasped a girdle fashioned like a golden

snake which held its tail in its mouth and from whose head flashed the glint of emerald eyes. Halted in the act of advancing, one long slim, high-arched foot, shod in a gilded sandal buckled with an emerald clasp, was like a spot of moonlight on the deep red of the rug that brought its blue-veined white perfection into startling definition. As her gaze met Ranleigh's startled eyes she paused with a sibilant intake of breath, and her right hand, from which the loose sleeve of her gown fell back, clutched at the silk curtain as if for support.

Her half-gasp found an echo in the panting exclamation of surprise which he gave. His heart gave a cold, nauseating lurch, and he dropped back in his chair, weak with sudden sickening weakness. He knew that slender, perfect body, that pale exquisite face. Once he'd seen them living; later. . . . She raised a hand as if to put back the fine misty rose-gold hair that flowed across her brow, the sleeve of her gown was attached to the shoulder at top, but had no seams, being really two silk gores connected by a series of short lengths of gilded cord, and her gesture bared the junction of her under-arm and shoulder. Across the milk-white skin of her armpit there showed an inch-long wound—he remembered—he had made it with his bistoury when he raised her axillary vein and artery to inject embalming fluid.

A chill as of a breath of icy wind ran through him. His reason told him not to be afraid. Who knows better than the embalmer that never till the Day of Judgment shall the dead walk in their mortal flesh again? But reason plays no part when outraged instinct runs amok. Terror, blind, insensate, irresistible, spread on his mind like moss on sodden ground.

Steadman was as white as any corpse. His lips moved slowly, laboredly, as if they had been numbed with cold. "Natacha!" he called in the thin tone of hysteria, then followed the name with a spate of pouring words which seemed to be all consonants.

The frail, pale woman smiled at him with bright vermilion lips and long, green, slanting eyes, answering lazily in a throaty caressing voice. Yet there was an indefinable, eery undercurrent to her tones that sent a fresh chill tingling up Ranleigh's spine, especially when she cast a momentary sidelong glance at him, and her foreign, unintelligible words became more slowly languorous. There was fascination in those long, green, secret eyes: they had a trick of sliding off obliquely from the thing they contemplated to lose themselves beneath the shadows of their long, black, silky lashes. *"Nichevo,"* * she finally pronounced with a shrug of her sleek shoulders, and silently as if she were a breath of breeze she turned and vanished between the curtains.

STEADMAN turned on Ranleigh, eyes ablaze: "Anything you've seen or heard tonight is under the seal of your profession!" he cried.

Ranleigh answered with a mirthless laugh. "I haven't any wish to be shut up in a madhouse. If I told anybody what I've just seen——"

"Of course"—something like vindictive glee edged Steadman's high, sharp laugh—"you wouldn't be believed. They'd say you're crazy——"

"Quite," Ranleigh interrupted evenly. "Even if the ethics of my calling didn't make me keep your confidence, it would be hard for me to find a person who'd believe me, but——" He stopped upon the conjunction. He had remembered something which his lawyer friend let drop one day in the shower room of the country club. Here was a way to force an explanation.

"Yes—but?" the other smiled sarcastic-

* No matter (Russian).

ally. "You'd better decide your eyes played tricks on you, my friend."

"I've told you I'm bound by professional ethics to respect your confidence," repeated Ranleigh, "but if I chose to disregard my obligation it might prove awkward. Perhaps you didn't know it, but the statute against sorcery and witchcraft has never been repealed in this state. It's a dead-letter, certainly; but if Murray Laboratories' order sheets were subpenaed, showing that you ordered canned blood from them today, and the record of your purchases of lady's wear at Maison Blanche were added to my testimony—don't you think you owe me something in the way of explanation, Mr. Steadman?"

Steadman shrugged resignedly. It was curious how his shell of bruskness melted, leaving him a tired and prematurely aged man, sitting inert in his chair as though pressed there by an insufferable weight of melancholy. "I don't know why I tell you," he answered in a weary voice. "You won't believe it. Nobody would. Sometimes I don't myself, until——" He paused, fumbled for a cigar in the silver humidor, then continued as he set it alight:

"You know I was in Harbin when my father died, and that I came home with a Russian wife. You don't know how I met her, though; I've never told before.

"The Japanese invasion of Mongolia and their setting up of Manchukuo marked the end of business for the Western bankers, and I was making ready to come home before I learned of Father's death. Termination of my work gave me a chance to do some things I'd never had time for. One of these was tiger hunting.

"Word had come of a big brute that terrorized the countryside around Koshan, so I collected a party and set out. Things went well enough for the first few kilometers, but as we neared the tiger country the rumors began to change. By the time we reached Koshan we heard that it was not a natural tiger, but a *ch'ing shih,* or vampire. D'ye know what a vampire is?"

"You mean like the one in the book—*Dracula?*" hazarded Ranleigh.

"That's near enough. In China and Mongolia the *ch'ing shih* may be an animated corpse, like Dracula, or an evil spirit which is sometimes disembodied, sometimes as substantial as a natural person. Generally they're the souls or corpses of black sorcerers, or their victims. For instance, a *ch'ing shih* may be a person who has met his death by sorcery and had a spell put on him by the magician, so that while he seems dead he revives occasionally, issues from his tomb, and nourishes himself on the blood he sucks from the living. Sometimes he doesn't seem to die at all, but leads a normal life, eating and drinking like everyone else; only he has to have a dose of human blood occasionally. Failing this he starves. In this form the *ch'ing shih* is relatively harmless, but if he dies what seems to be a natural death, or if he's killed, he comes back as a full-fledged vampire, savage as a tiger and wicked as a snake. Also, in this second state, he's capable of shape-shifting, and can take whatever form he pleases, though generally he assumes the shape of a tiger or jackal, or sometimes just a domestic cat.

"According to the Slavic tradition the only way to lay a vampire is to come on him in daylight when he's helpless in his tomb and drive an ash stake through his heart before you cut his head off. Such treatment's unavailing with a *ch'ing shih.* As long as any part of him remains he can materialize, so you have to track him down and burn him till there's nothing left.

"WELL, the upshot of it was I told the village headman that if they'd help me hunt a tiger, and we found nothing in a week, I'd turn to and help them get rid

of their *ch'ing shih*. It seemed as if the tiger—or the *ch'ing shih*—heard about our bargain, for they both lay low, and for a solid week there were no killings. Then on a Sunday night all hell broke loose. A peasant girl was caught just outside her hut and so badly mauled and torn that you could hardly recognize her as the remnants of a human being, and almost at the same time a swineherd twenty miles away was slashed to ribbons. The third case happened twenty kilos west of Koshan. It was a woman who was attacked in bed, and not only her body, but her pallet and sleeping-rug were ripped to shreds.

"Suspicion centered in a man known as Ko'en Cheng whose yeaman was some fifteen kilos north and west of Koshan. He'd been noted as a sorcerer—not the white kind—and also as a heartless usurer. Three months or so before he'd been killed in a bandit raid, and left besides an evil reputation a young widow, a White Russian refugee whom he'd married several years before.

"I don't suppose you know these 'refugees.' Taken by and large they're pretty scabious. Some of 'em, of course, are the genuine article, but a lot more are just offscum from the jails and slums and brothels who found no tolerance in the new régime and ran away to save their hides and ply their various unsavory trades wherever they could find a refuge. So I was pretty suspicious concerning what I'd find when I set out for Ko'en Cheng's yeaman.

"I certainly had a surprise in store. The place was small, but exquisite. It was surrounded by a gray-brick wall with yellow tiles set like a gabled roof along its top. The gate was made of cedar and ornamented with carved timbers, and inside the wall was a tiled courtyard with the familiar spirit-screen just beyond the gate. The house was roofed with green tiles and from the eaves hung little bronze bells which rang musically at every gust of breeze. As I walked between the rows of dwarf quince trees to the door I heard somebody singing in the house.

"It was an odd, deep, throaty voice, and the singer evidently sang for her own amusement, a sort of crooning lullaby of contentment:

The birds have all flown from their trees,
The last, last fleecy cloud has drifted by,
But never shall we tire in our companionship,
O my belovèd, thou and I.

"A verse from China's classic poet Li Po, rendered into Russian and set to hauntingly-sad Russian music. The timbre of that deep, sweet, thrilling voice did things to my throat—and heart. I wondered what I'd find when I knocked on the lacquered door.

"The woman was her voice made manifest, the incarnation of her song. I needn't describe her; you've seen her——" He nodded toward the curtained room; then:

"When I told her what we'd come for she made no objection. Her husband had been buried in a nearby field, and she took us to his grave and told us we might look into his coffin if we wished, but he had been dead three months and the summer had been hot. Then she left us without another word.

"My coolies shoveled the earth off the coffin, but when we'd bared it they balked. I had undertaken to find the *ch'ing shih;* it was my place to force the coffin. So I took a crowbar and prized up the lid.

"In your work you must have done the same thing many times. I never had, and when I felt the wooden dowels give and saw the heavy coffin-top come loose I went positively sick. But surprise drove disgust away, for the body in the coffin was as fresh as if it had been dead no more than an hour. Fresher, I'd say, for there was no look of death about it.

"It was an old, old man with thin, straggling gray hair and a wisp of white beard

on his chin, but the lips were full and slightly colored and there was a healthy tint in the cheeks. If I hadn't known that he was dead I'd have sworn he'd crawled into the coffin for a nap, and when I touched his hands and cheeks the flesh was warm.

"Now that I'd taken the odium of grave-robbery on me the coolies' courage came back with a rush, and they crowded round the coffin, jabbering and pointing. In a few moments they had made a pile of brush and straw around it, and shouted for me to apply the match.

"The fuel burned fiercely, and the coffin, of Mongolian cedar, caught the flames like tinder. As the fire began to eat into the lacquered hollow log that formed the coffin the corpse began to writhe. I don't mean that it struggled to get out. It didn't. It seemed unable to raise itself, but it turned from side to side, twisting and contorting as in dreadful agony, and waved its hands and kicked its feet. But even then the face retained its calm, serene expression until, just as the blazing coffin-sides were about to fall in, the mouth gaped open and a sudden geyser of red, bright blood spouted up, six feet at least, I'd say, and spattered with a vicious hiss into the fire. Then the coffin fell like a log burned in two, and the flames licked up around the body, hiding it from us.

"Several of my coolies had been spattered by the blood, and next day I took them to an Armenian doctor at Koshan, for everywhere the blood had touched them ulcers formed. The lesions seemed like rodent ulcerations, eating right through skin and flesh and bone, and the doctor finally had to amputate in every case.

"Strangely, the old man's widow not only was not resentful, but seemed actually grateful to me, and as I had to stay at Koshan while my boys were being treated I went to see her several times.

"I think I must have loved her from the moment I first heard her voice. I know I loved her by my third trip to her yeaman. We were married just before I left Koshan for Harbin, and when I got back to my hotel there I found the cable announcing my father's death.

"I NEVER spoke to Natacha about her life with Ko'en Cheng. One doesn't do such things. And she never vouchsafed any information, but old Musya her ayah * was less reticent. If I hadn't shut her off, she'd have told me everything about their life at Ko'en Cheng's yeaman. Once, before I forbade her to tell anything about my wife's past, she declared Ko'en Cheng had 'magicked milady to death,' but whether she meant he'd performed tricks of sorcery till Natacha was wearied of them, or that he'd actually killed her I could not determine. She spoke execrable English.

"You remember, of course, Natacha died while I was in Mexico. When I came home I found old Musya had smothered her grave with garlic, and in addition stuck a wild rose bush right where I wanted to set up the headstone."

Somewhere in Ranleigh's inner consciousness a small alarm bell seemed to ring. He knew but little of such things, but vaguely he remembered hearing that a vampire could not stand the touch or smell of garlic, or the nearness of a wild rose thorn or blossom—that it could not pass a place where either was. Who was it told him that, or had he read it somewhere? He gave the matter up, for Steadman was continuing:

"I had the cemetery grub the weeds up and remound the grave. They finished work two days ago."

"Yes?" prompted Ranleigh as the other paused.

* Nurse.

"Night before last—the night before I called on you—I was reading late in my study when I heard a tapping at the window. I thought it was a wind-blown branch striking the pane at first, but it came again, louder and more insistently, as if someone outside sought admission, and when I looked up, there was Natacha. Her lovely eyes were open wide, looking longingly at me, and she held her hands out imploringly. Of course, I thought it was a dream, but I threw the window open and called her, and she came in.

"It was no ghost or figment of a dream, but my own Natacha in the solid flesh, glowing and vibrant, but as cold as death's own self. I took her to the fire and wrapped her in a rug, but she grew no warmer; just huddled there and shivered like a frightened, trembling bird. At last she seemed to gain a little strength, and held her hands out to me. 'Kiss me!' she implored, as though she starved for a caress.

"I took her in my arms, but instead of putting her lips against mine she put them around them, covering my mouth completely and seeming to draw the very breath out of my lungs. I felt myself grow faint, like a swimmer mauled and pounded by the surf until his lungs are full of water, and my eyes seemed blinded by a sort of mist. I could hear a ringing in my ears; then everything went black as I dropped to my knees. I wasn't quite unconscious; I could still feel her arms round me, gripping me with a hold which seemed stronger every minute, and it seemed as if she'd transferred her lips to my throat. I kept growing weaker, but I felt no pain nor fear. A sort of languorous ecstasy was spreading through me. Then I went completely out, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor before the fire with Natacha bending over me, holding my cheeks between her palms and murmuring Russian love-names to me. She was warm now; warm and glowing with vitality, and, weak as I was, the flame of my love rose to meet the glowing fire of hers.

"We counted every minute of that night as misers count their gold. I heaped logs upon the fire until the flames leaped up the chimney like a holocaust, but in a little while she began to be chilled again, and presently she gasped for air until I let her put her mouth to mine and draw breath from me. That revived her somewhat, and when she'd sucked a little more blood from my throat she seemed herself once more, though I could not feel the movement of her heart against mine as she lay in my arms.

"Before the morning came she told me. Old Musya had not spoken figuratively when she said Ko'en Cheng 'magicked Natacha to death.' He'd done just that—kept her bound and starved her for days in a cellar, reciting charms and incantations over her until she died, or seemed to. Then he revived her by his magic arts, and after that she lived normally, except that every once in a while she had a sudden inordinate craving for warm human blood. Then he'd go out with a small silver vase and bring it back filled to the brim with blood. She'd drink it, almost at a draft, and the craving passed away, sometimes for a few weeks, sometimes for months together.

"But the whole point was this: Ko'en Cheng had infected her as a *ch'ing shih*. As yet she was in the primary stage, being able to subsist on ordinary food and drink, and only needing human blood occasionally, but when she fell ill here and seemed to die again she really passed into the tertiary stage of vampirism. She is now a true *ch'ing shih*, a complete vampire, able to support existence only by repeated drafts of human blood, unable to draw breath from the air for any considerable time, and forced to steal her breath from living people.

"Not only that: Her appetite increases

constantly. The little blood she drew from me night before last will be inadequate to nourish her in a short time. Within a week she'll need a pint of blood a day, and after that a quart; in a month or two a gallon will be scarcely adequate to sustain her from one day to the next.

"Like Ko'en Cheng when I found him in his grave, she lies in pseudo-death from cock-crow to sunset, and during that time she must rest in her coffin, either that in which she was originally buried, or one substantially like it, and some earth from her original grave must be in it, or she cannot find rest.

"Natacha was my first and only love. Women never had meant much to me until I met her, and the thought of having her with me again, on any terms—in any way—was like the offer of a cool drink to a man who dies of thirst. She had to go back to her grave at sunrise yesterday, but I determined to make preparations to enable her to stay here with me. First I came to you and bought a casket; then I ordered clothes for her at Maison Blanche, and a supply of blood—enough for several days at her present appetite—from the Murray Laboratories. On my way home I visited the cemetery and took a shovelful of earth from her grave. Now everything has been arranged. She need never leave me, day or night."

He turned defiantly on Ranleigh. "You think I'm crazy, of course. You don't believe a word of this——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Steadman, but I do," the funeral director denied. "I only wish that I could think you're crazy and this whole thing the illusion of a deranged mind, but—I know that body—Mrs. Steadman, I mean. I can identify it—her—positively. But would you mind explaining one thing more?"

"I will if I can."

"I noticed that there are no mirrors in the room where you had me take the casket. It's furnished like a lady's powder room, but——"

Steadman nodded sadly as his interrogator paused. "A mirror would be useless there. Substantial as they are in every other way, vampires cannot cast a shadow in the sun or strike back reflections from a mirror. She has to make her toilet without looking-glasses, or depend on me to help her.

"Of course, in the circumstances, I don't dare keep the servants here after sundown. I have them come at ten o'clock in the morning, and leave by four in the afternoon. During daylight I shall keep the door to my wife's room locked."

Ranleigh rose and held his hand out. "Only two men in America, you and I, know about this," he declared. "I think that we're the only ones who would believe it, too. You won't tell; I can't. Your secret is safe——"

"For the present, yes," his host broke in, "but there's something else I want you to do for me, Mr. Ranleigh. I'm not a well man. Only last week Dr. Draper warned me I might drop off any minute with a heart attack. I'd like to know that when I die you'll take charge of my body and inter it in Natacha's grave. Also, I want you to make sure she's cremated. As long as I live I can see her wants are supplied, but with my death she'll have no one to procure blood for her, and when that happens she'll go raging through the countryside, exactly as Ko'en Cheng did in Mongolia, killing anyone she comes on for his breath and blood. . . . You can arrange it, can't you?"

"Of course," responded Ranleigh. Practically, he knew there would be almost insuperable difficulties. How could he get a transit permit for a body long since certified as buried? Who would sign a death certificate for a woman dead and in her grave almost a year? But these were things for him to worry over. His first duty was

to ease his patron's mind, so he nodded confidently again.

RANLEIGH'S thoughts were circling and spinning like a squirrel in its cage as he shot his self-starter and turned his car toward home. With his own eyes he'd seen the dead walk, looked into the eyes he'd sealed, heard words issue from the mouth he'd closed—Steadman's story must be true: he could not doubt the testimony of his senses. But who but he and Steadman would believe it? What jury would give even momentary credence if he told them what he'd seen and heard, what lunacy commission would delay a moment to pronounce him insane when they heard the narrative of his experience tonight? This was an issue he must face alone, a problem he must solve by himself.

Dog-tired, exhausted mentally as well as physically, he put the car in the garage. Mechanically rather than consciously he refilled the gas tank and checked oil and water. Funeral directors, like the fire department, must keep vehicles in readiness for instant response to the unexpected call. A final check-up of the tires' pressure gage. "Now that's done, thank heaven. Good Lord but I'm sleepy!" he yawned as he stumbled rather than walked to his bedroom.

Sleep was instantaneous and almost as deep as anesthesia, but when he wakened it was to complete consciousness. The moon had long since set, and in the sky there was the changing light that heralds dawn. Involuntarily he sat up in bed, breathing quickly, and his breath plumed out before him in the frosty early-morning air, ash-gray, like cigarette smoke. Someone—something—stood between him and the window, silhouetted dimly in the wan light. It was a woman's form, small, wizened, bent with rheumatism, and—this was utterly absurd, of course!—it seemed garbed in one of his ten-fifty burial dresses.

But was it absurd? Ranleigh knew his merchandize as he knew the lines of his hand. Those rather sleazy rayon crêpe dresses were furnished with his cheaper funerals, such as that he'd conducted for —the figure made a little abrupt movement, brought its face into the slowly strengthening light, and he recognized the withered wrinkled countenance—Musya. Musya the old nurse and lady's maid who hanged herself when Natacha died, and whom he'd buried without pay!

Now, surely, he was dreaming. The things he'd seen at Mortmain Manor, the bizarre story Steadman told him, these had induced this vision . . . he stopped the rationalizing thought and leant toward the cerememted figure, for she was speaking in the high, cracked voice he remembered, and bobbing at him with a stiff-kneed curtsy.

"The *gaspadin* must not be frightened. Musya means him no harm; she has come —it is permitted her—to ask a favor from him. A favor which will give the dead peace and the living safety. Yes, the *gaspadin* must listen, please.

"He does not know, nor does anybody else, but Musya—old ugly Musya the Tartar half-caste—was the mother of the beauteous Natacha. Who her father was it makes no matter, time is pressing, and the *gaspadin* must understand. When Natacha wed the evil Ko'en Cheng she was desperate. She and Musya were starving; but had she known the thing he was, the thing that he would make of her, she would gladly have faced hunger's pangs, or given her fair body to the wolves or tigers. *Nichevo*—never mind—it is too late for vain regrets. Milord Steadman has told the *gaspadin* Natacha's history, how she came back from the grave to greet him with a kiss. Ahee! It was the kiss of death! Had he not had the safety-giving garlic

rooted up and torn the wild rose from its place, she would be lying in her grave all harmless.

"Musya put the garlic and the wild rose there, for Musya knew what would befall when Natacha had seemed to die, but really had become *ch'ing shih*. Musya should have had the *gaspadin* burn Natacha's fair body with the fire that cleanses, but when she saw her child all beautiful in her false death she could not do it. Besides, she would do that which is required to make the vampire's grave a safe one. Then, when she'd sown the garlic seed and planted the wild rose, because she had no further need of life, she would destroy herself. How was foolish old Musya to know that Milord Steadman would undo her work?

"Aie—aie! The *gaspadin* must rise and dress all quickly and hasten to the house of Milord Steadman. The fate which no man may escape however last or far he travels has found him, and he lies cold in death beside the coffin of Natacha. The dawning comes and all will be well till the evening sun goes down, but then Natacha will awaken and find no food to ease her craving, so she will go out ravening and killing. For that is what the *ch'ing shih* does. Oh, yes!

"The *gaspadin* will go at once and give the bodies of Natacha and Milord Steadman to the cleansing flames? Only so can he prevent the night-terror from going forth upon its raids. Only thus can he give Natacha the peaceful rest the true dead have, protect the poor ones who may be her victims otherwise, and keep Milord Steadman from being even such as she. Oh, yes; he, too, will be *ch'ing shih*. Has she not drunk his breath and blood, has she not fleshed her lips in his throat? And does not the mad wolf make all other wolves he bites go mad?"

Something of the urgency of her appeal communicated itself to him. It was not her words alone, but something undefinable, a sort of psychic fluid which seemed flowing from her mind to his. Despite himself he was convinced. He felt the exigency of the entreaty; the sudden compulsion for haste—this must be done quickly, or the countryside would reek with a vile virus. Dozens, scores, perhaps hundreds of graves would become lairs for fetid demons of the night. . . . Oh, hurry—*hurry!*

"All right," he answered. "I'll go there——"

"Bless you! Oh, kindly heaven bless you, *gaspadin!*"

He turned away a moment, feeling for the light switch. The lamps flashed on, but when he faced around old Musya was nowhere in sight.

THE house was very still as he forced the front door back. Fading in the strengthening light of the bright winter sun the gas lamps burned with a faint hissing; despite his rubber heels his footsteps echoed hollowly on the waxed floors. The whole place seemed to hold its breath as if it gasped in awe-struck horror at a tragedy it had witnessed—or waited for.

Steadman half knelt, half lay by the casket, his hands, already stiffening in rigor mortis, grasping at the écru lining of the burial case, as though death paralyzed him as he attempted to climb into it. His head was thrown back to expose his throat, on which there showed a series of small perforated wounds, as though the skin had been repeatedly stabbed with long sharp needles. But there was no blood on or near the punctures. His face was very pale. His eyes were not quite closed, and a thin thread of white showed through his lashes. His mouth was slightly opened, lax and curved down at the corners, as if he were very tired.

Ranleigh bent and felt his wrist, knowing in advance there would be no pulsation

there. He had not dealt with death for thirty years for nothing.

Natacha lay in her casket as in a bed. Her head was turned a little to the side; one slim hand rested on her breast, the other lay beside her, and in the flickering light of the gas jet it seemed her bosom rose and fell in a light peaceful sleep.

"Lovely," murmured Ranleigh as he looked at her, "so lovely!" It would be a desecration—worse, a murder—to destroy this glowing, vibrant beauty. How could he do it?

He was tempted. He could close the casket, take her to his funeral home and keep her there until . . . yes, until? Until the sun went down, and those black silken lashes fluttered up, disclosing long green eyes . . . then when the red lips parted and the deep, melodious voice addressed him . . . what madness was this? He was a funeral director, one who disposed of the dead. But he served the living, too. Yes, the living! Old Musya's pleading echoed in his inward ear: "Give the dead peace and the living safety!"

The plan came to him full-formed, complete. From lamp to lamp he went, turning from the burners. He tested every window, every door, making sure they were closed tightly, then hurried to the kitchen to turn the burners of the gas range on full force. The disagreeable pungent odor of acetylene was growing stronger every second . . . if only there were enough in the storage tank. No matter, he would have to chance that. Only embers glowed upon the hearth, but he dragged logs from the wood box, piled them in log-cabin formation upon the andirons and blew on the ashes until a little curl of orange flame rose flickering in a spiral. Now, hurry!

He slammed the door behind him, threw his clutch in and rode racing from the courtyard of the old house. The dashboard clock said 9:15; the servants would report at ten o'clock. He must be well away before then.

Five miles had clicked off on his speedometer when the blast roared through the quiet winter morning. From the hilltop where the manor house stood lighted in the slanting rays of the pale winter sun a shaft of white fire geysered up, sank for an instant like a guttering candle, then volcanoed up again. Then came the rushing, leaping, coruscating, roaring wall of yellow flame. Pouring from the opened jets and mixing with the air in the closed house the carbide gas had been ignited by the blaze in the fireplace, exploded with a blast of almost incalculable heat, and fired the centuries-old, oil-soaked woodwork of the building as if it had been celluloid touched by live fire. In half an hour Mortmain Manor would be only a charred mass of glowing embers and a heap of fire-blasted brick.

What was it Musya begged him to do—give them to the cleansing fire? She could rest easy in her grave—the grave he'd purchased for her—till the Judgment Day. He'd carried her request out to the letter.

"It was our herds, our mounts, and our own lives that the warriors sought."

A Million Years in the Future

By THOMAS P. KELLY

The weirdest and most exciting interplanetary story ever printed—a tale of the Wolves of Worra and the Nine Terrible Sisters, and the fearsome Black Raiders

1. Jan of the Purple City

THIS is a story of triumph and failure, a story of what happened when the Black Raiders came from the stars with their vapors of death; the strange tale that I, Jan, Prince of the Purple City and last man of my world, the planet Earth, tell of the year 1,001,940.

Nor will there ever be a sequel to this story. Never again will the ebon hordes bring terror from the skies. Never again will their space-ships come to bear our maids to the orgies of their temples, or carry fettered slaves and warriors to the sands of their arenas. No more will the eternal Tara flaunt her blinding beauty, or laugh while all around her are the cries and screams of the dying. The terrible Secret of the Bells was at last told to an Earthman, and mine are the hands that blew a world to a hundred trillion atoms.

And now I am alone, alone in the gathering dusk of my own planet to begin the writing of this strange narrative—Earth's last and final story. All around me are the dreary plains and moss-covered hills of what was once the bottom of a mighty ocean. Overhead the stars are growing brighter and more numerous. Soon they

will appear in the great number that will encompass the heavens. Then will come the moons—those three tiny, jagged bodies—to brighten the bleak landscape with their weird and ghostly light.

And yet in the terrible silence of a lifeless world I write on and on, writing of a planet and a civilization that is no more, writing words that can never know the eyes of other than myself.

Why, then, should I continue this story, or insist on telling that which must forever remain a secret? Perhaps it is the memories of the wild adventures that were mine upon that distant world, Capara. Perhaps it is the thoughts of how I so well held my own against the swordsmen of the Eternal One, or the warriors of the Fire King who reigned on a distant sun; how I found the golden Ball of Life, beheld the great god, Time, or slew the Nine Terrible Sisters who had known a million years!

But no. In these final hours I believe it is for another purpose—that I take a pride in telling of the bravery of my race, of that white-skinned, dark-haired people who are no more. For I am a Prince of the Bardonians, that proud and fearless race who were last to fall before the Migs when the terrible little brown men came to our world with their incalculable numbers, to raze our homes and steal our women.

That, of course, was eons ago. Since then our world has known many invasions from the sky—the yellow-skinned Trulls—the Saurian men of Sura—the weird, insect-like creatures with their wands of light, who came from the lost planetoid—the beautiful warrior-women from a star so distant as to be invisible to the naked eye.

And then at last the ones whose very name brought terror to our world, that shouting and barbaric horde who swept down all before them—the Black Raiders!

Through the ages, at irregular intervals, the invasions had continued, while the inhabitants of our ravaged planet slowly dwindled in numbers, in power, in intellect itself. The elders of the twenty or more still remaining tribes who inhabited the ruined cities of the ancients were ever loud in telling of that fact, talking always of the great civilization and the billions our world had known as far back in the dawning as a million years ago.

And amid the crumbling grandeur of a once mighty metropolis that my people knew only as the Purple City, I, Jan, Prince of the Bardonians and the world's last man, was born a score and some four years before the death of my planet.

My father, Thargo the Just, had long been King and sole ruler of the thousand or more barbaric, almost naked people who were his subjects. It was this same monarch who had fought so bitterly against the black hordes, years ago, when last the Raiders came to loot and terrorize our world. It was this beloved ruler also, who for so long had been trying to bring about a semblance of peace between the still remaining tribes.

It is needless to mention those early years that passed so swiftly and pleasantly, while I was blissfully unaware of the wild life before me. Suffice it to say they were spent in learning the wisdom of the elders, and those who were my tutors; of the little known lands beyond our borders; of what would be expected of one of my royal lineage, as well as the strange history of the mighty ruins around me.

Nor was my physical welfare neglected. From the first it was evident nature had endowed me with an almost superhuman strength, and the sword-arm of a master. Not that powerful men were uncommon in our clean-limbed, six-foot race, but even in my teens I excelled in wrestling and all feats of endurance, and on entering into manhood found their stoutest warriors unable to withstand me in the sham

duels and athletic contests that were the delight and diversion of the warrior-like Bardonian tribe.

Strength and a skilled sword-arm were ever quick to win applause with the populace of the Purple City, and to that little community I was not only their future King but an acclaimed hero as well. Even now I can recall the proud face of my sire at the shouting of my name; but far more vivid is the memory of that last night when I was summoned to his presence, where, alone amid the towering pillars of his great throne room, he spoke to me in a soft tone, for I was his only heir.

THARGO, my father, was a tall, powerful man, of almost my own height —and I am six feet four inches. Naked, except for the leather trappings and soft sandals that were the universal apparel of our planet, the terrible fate of the woman he loved, years before, had so embittered him as to make habitually stern the features of a once handsome face. And yet there was an approving light in his eyes as they met mine. He looked at me before he spoke.

"You are fortunate in more ways than one, my boy," he began, "fortunate in being endowed not only with a royal lineage, but the muscles of a Titan as well. That in itself is good. Used wisely, strength becomes a blessing, and an aid to those around you.

"But there is another side that must be considered," he added in warning, "a dangerous side as well, Jan. Used wrongly, it becomes a curse, and brands you a tyrant. Remember always those words when that brawn is called upon."

His strong fingers gripped my shoulder in a half-caress. "But I have little fear that your actions will ever bring me other than honor.

"There are only too few of us left, Jan. We cannot afford to war with the tribes that still remain. At best, our planet holds no more than fifty thousand humans, who inhabit the ruins of the once great cities that dot its dreary, war-scarred surface. Ah, but the many invasions from the other worlds have indeed taken their frightful toll, have reduced to a mockery of a once great number, a wild and war-like people —an almost naked and comparatively primitive people, when one thinks of the great space-ships and terrible weapons of the Black Raiders."

"The Black Raiders," I echoed, uttering the three most terrifying words in our universe—words young mothers frequently used to silence an unruly child.

My father nodded.

"You have never seen them, Jan. It is my prayer you never will. When last they came I was but a young man, scarcely much older than yourself. I had your lovely mother then. You were a tiny baby. I had my life before me. For thirty years no alien foot had touched our planet, and we were beginning to hope that at last the great curse had lifted, and our ravaged little universe had been forgotten by its terrible conquerors.

"And then one day they came again. Out from the great void that lies between us and their distant planet came the Black Raiders, and once more our world ran red with blood. Oh, the memories of those awful hours! Battles by day—fires by night—death and pillage all the time. Why they did not seek our total extinction is strange, for it was well within their power. It was as though they but used us for sport, and permitted the survival of a few thousand for further invasions.

For two long weeks stark terror reigned, and when at last the ebon hordes departed in their great space-ships, sated with blood and weary of slaughter, they took our greatest treasures with them—our hardiest warriors for the sands of their arenas, our fairest daughters for the

harems of their nobles. Yes; they indeed took our loved ones, and—among them was——"

Here his voice trailed off to silence, but no words were needed to complete that sentence. Well I knew what had happened. When the Black Raiders finally left they had taken the loveliest maids of the Purple City with them, among them was the beautiful girl who was the Queen herself—my mother!

There was nothing I could say, and so in silence I followed my sire to the tiny alcove at the far end of the room that led to a lofty gallery and a starlit summer night. Below us lay the crumbling grandeur of the Purple City, wrapped in slumber, for the hour was late. A night wind whistled in the ivy-covered ruins, while high overhead a million stars flashed green, blue and bright crimson.

The Bardonian King pointed to a distant, brilliant star, somewhat apart from the others, whose silvery light shone cold and unblinking.

"That is Capara—the home of the Black Raiders. That is the terrible world to which your unhappy mother was taken, long years ago. That is the awful star from which she may be looking down upon us at this very moment—sad-eyed, longing, hoping.

"So remember what I have told you this night, Jan," he concluded. "Remember that a wise King seeks not war, but peace; that a good ruler will go to any length to protect the welfare of his people. But should the Black Raiders ever again come to our world, remember what was stolen from both you and me when last they were upon us."

I HAD, of course, expected many other nights in the company of my royal sire, but fate, which even then was spinning the impenetrable webs of the future, ordained I should see him no more, nor was I ever again to know the plains and valleys of my homeland.

Early the following morning I and four Bardonian warriors rode far to the north, and toward the distant mountains that marked the boundary of our country, in the annual inspection of its long unguarded borders. It was a barbaric-looking picture we presented in that early light. The leather trappings and soft sandals were our only raiment, while strapped to the waist of each of us was a longsword, a shortsword, a keen slender dagger—weapons whose use we had been acquainted with since childhood. The weird, fleet-footed kangs we rode but helped to complete that picture.

It was these speedy, timid beasts, kangs, which were the universal mounts of our world; and while their exact origin was not known for a certainty, it was generally supposed they had descended from a small herd the Black Raiders had brought with them on their first invasions to our planet, fourteen centuries earlier. Though possessed of an almost unbelievable speed —a kang in flight has been known to clear a twelve-foot-high obstacle with a rider on its back—their tiny pink eyes, black fur-like hair and slender legs, together with the long, solitary horn protruding from the center of the head, tended to substantiate this hypothesis and render them most unearthly in appearance.

High noon found us within a few miles of the mountain range that was our objective. We were rapidly nearing its rocky base when one of the warriors suddenly called my attention to a thin column of smoke rising upward, directly ahead. Almost at the same instant shrill cries reached us, and a moment later we were pulling up beside a little scene both grim and tragic.

There crawling slowly toward us was a grimy, blood-covered figure. Only when I had dismounted did recognition come.

In our little community of some ten hundred people there was scarcely a face that was not at least slightly familiar, and the gray-haired old woman before me I knew as one who, with her son, eked out an existence in the raising and selling of young kangs which they brought to the markets of the Purple City at regular intervals. Near by the smoldering ruins of a tiny hut were black and desolate.

The glazing eyes went wide as I knelt beside her.

"Prince Jan!" she gasped. "It—it is you?"

"Yes, mother, it is I," I nodded. "But tell me, what has happened? Who has dared to do this to you?"

I bent low to catch her words, for I could see the end was near.

"They came yesterday—the Thovians," she answered. "There were three of them. They rushed in on us and slew my son as we sat at our morning meal. Their bearded leader buried his knife in my body. Then with terrible shouts and curses they set fire to our hut, and drove off with our little herd of kangs. I was only half conscious, but dared not move, for they thought me dead and would have surely killed me had I made a sound. I waited and—and——"

She gave a little sob as she spoke, then sank back into my arms.

The Thovians! Ah, but I might have known it! That cowardly, treacherous, thieving tribe, whose crumbling city lay a hundred miles or so beyond our mountainous borders. For years we had attempted to live in concord with this neighboring people—my father willing to overlook their petty thefts and misdemeanors. This, however, was more than thievery. They had not only dared to enter our country, but had murdered its subjects as well!

My blood boiled as I wheeled to my followers.

"Look after this woman," I ordered two of them. "Give her every possible aid, and if she rallies, try taking her back to the Purple City."

"And you, Prince Jan?" asked one, a grizzled old warrior I had known since childhood.

"I am going to find the men responsible for this," I answered, vaulting to the back of my mount. "I am going to follow them to the Thovian capital if need be, and drag them back to the Hall of Justice for trial."

"But you dare not!" he cried. "No; you dare not. It's the command of your father to avoid bloodshed. He would be furious, oh Prince. We must use tact and——"

"Too late for that," I shouted, motioning the two others to follow me. "This is beyond tact. This is murder. If we allow those men to go unpunished, they will be entering the Purple City next, and slitting our throats while we sleep. Tell my father I will either return with those murderers or renounce my lineage!"

The next instant my charger had sprung forward, and behind me came the others.

I could still hear the shouts of the old warrior in protest, but I took no notice of them or did other than to urge my kang on faster. I heard his shouts long after I lost sight of him, but on we went at a mad gallop, and a few minutes later were beyond the border of our own land and into a strange country where I never before had been.

JUST at dusk we came to a vast and desolate landscape, a dreary, moss-covered waste that stretched away to the sky, which I knew was once the bottom of a mighty ocean.

Our ancients tell us that far back in the fogs of antiquity our planet knew many great seas; that as the ages passed

they had slowly dried and vanished, till there remained but the few shallow lakes and streams we now know—adding that in a not distant day even these would evaporate, to leave an arid, waterless world.

But at the moment there was more of immediate importance than prophecies. Somewhere out on that desolate waste three murderers were hurrying with their loot to the Thovian capital. As Prince and Protector of my people, it was a duty I owed them to bring that trio to justice, and so, despite the protests of the others, I could but motion them on, and resume our tiring journey.

All that night we continued as fast as our jaded mounts would go. The stars came out and the three jagged moons sailed slowly across the sky, but still we pursued our weary way. Our age-old legends tell us that eons past those three small moons were one great satellite; that when the Migs first came to our planet, five hundred thousand years ago, there were mighty cities and millions of Earth folk living on the vast plains of its interior.

The legends have it also, that these same people refused to pay tribute to the little brown men, and that in their rage the Migs turned their terrible rays of light upon the moon—bringing instant death to its inhabitants, and rending it to the three tiny bodies we now know.

Through the night we rode. The first streaks of gray were paling the eastern sky, and it was evident the waning strength of our kangs would soon force a halt, when on topping a small hill I saw that which brought an exclamation from my lips, and sent a thrill surging through me.

There, directly below us in a little valley, was a tiny campfire; and stretched around its flickering flames, their weapons glittering in the firelight, three Thovian warriors lay in slumber.

2. Thovian Pursuit

THERE could be no doubt as to their identity. They were indeed the three we sought. Even from the hilltop I could make out the powerful frame and bearded features of one of them—features that readily tallied with the old woman's description of her attacker. The evil faces of the others were those of habitual thieves and murderers.

And if additional proof were needed, it was quickly given in the dozen or more black forms huddled together just beyond the firelight—fettered kangs, each of whose left front and hind legs were strapped together to prevent them from wandering away in the dark.

It was this that gave cause for an immediate worry. Kangs are notoriously timid creatures, and when frightened give the piercing little barks so familiar to our world. It was these I feared. Their sharp ears were sure to hear the slightest tread, and this would result in the shrill barks that could easily awaken the sleepers. Caution, then, was all-important. I had dismounted, and now motioned the others to do likewise and approach me.

"We will divide here," I spoke in a whisper. "It is our best plan. You two can encircle them from the left, while I close in from the right. Stay just beyond the firelight until you hear my signal, then draw your weapons and rush them."

"If they resist us, Prince?" came the answering whisper of one. "If they should show fight?"

"Then show fight also and—and——" But I suddenly remembered the many warnings of my father to avoid bloodshed. I could almost feel his presence, as if he were beside me awaiting my words.

"Well, try taking them alive, of course," I continued. "But remember you are to guard yourselves at all times, and be sure you take them. Be careful also, for the

love of your ancestors. The slightest sound or misstep is sure to awaken the kangs, and that will mean discovery."

I waited till they had crept into the gloom, then turned to the task before me. A silent descent of the little hill was not hard. The soft, moss-like vegetation that covered the entire surface of this vast, once submerged land, made stealth an easy matter. It was not till I had come within a dozen paces of the sleepers that there was cause for alarm. Numerous dry twigs and small pieces of firewood had been strewn around, that could easily result in a loud crackling sound, were I to step upon them.

Softly I drew nearer. I could hear the rhythmical breathing of the trio, which tended to lessen the sound of my approach. I had already singled out the bearded man for my first victim. Could I gag and bind him, the capture of the others would be in order. I was within two paces of him now. Another minute and the soft stripping I carried would be thrust into his half-opened mouth and stifle any cry.

On tiptoe I came beside him and was sinking to my knees, when the man, as though warned by some subtle sense, suddenly opened his eyes and sat up!

For an instant we both stared at each other, the bearded face showing an amazement almost comical. So great was his surprise that for a second he forgot to cry out, and then it was too late. My hands flew to his throat even as his mouth opened, and the next instant I sprang upward, giving the powerful jerk that shot the startled Thovian up to and upon his feet as though he were a child.

There was but a single mishap, and yet it was enough. As the man flew upward his legs swung in the wide circle that sent them crashing against a heavy cooking-pot. In an instant it had awakened the others, who sprang to their feet, and then, simultaneously, several things happened. The bearded one sought to grapple with me. My right fist shot to his jaw with a force that dropped him, unconscious, in his tracks. Another sprang toward me with an uplifted knife. An instant later and he too was on the ground, disarmed and screaming from a broken wrist.

Even at the first sounds of the struggle several barks had risen from the nearby kangs—barks that were quickly taken up by the entire herd as the nervous creatures woke from their slumbers. And now these, together with the cries of the man at my feet, rose up in a frightful din to split that ghostly pre-dawn light.

As the remaining warrior saw the last of his comrades go down his hand flew to his sword, and I whipped out my own weapon. For a moment he stood thus, as though uncertain whether to engage with me or not, then, with a little cry, wheeled and dashed away at the same instant that my two companions appeared in the firelight.

"After him!" I shouted to them. "Don't let him get away!" In the cold spectral light, I could see their hurrying forms for a moment, and just ahead of them the running Thovian. Then the whiteness enveloped the three of them.

I turned to the two men at my feet. The one with the broken wrist was still groaning, but it was his companion with whom I wished to speak. Presently the bearded one came to himself, and at a word from me rose slowly to his feet, a hand nursing his swollen jaw.

"You are a Thovian?" I began.

He glared at me defiantly.

"Answer me!" I snapped.

"I am a Thovian." His reply was in a surly tone. "A Thovian and an honest man, as is my companion here. We have done nothing. Why did you attack us?"

"Who owns those kangs?" I went on, ignoring his question as I pointed to the little herd that had gradually quieted and were now watching our every move.

"I do," he retorted, "and what of it? I was taking them to the markets at the Thovian capital, and we camped here for the night. Nothing wrong in that, is there?"

"Not if they're yours. But entering another country and killing to get them throws a different light on the matter."

I HAD expected a vigorous denial, but his answering words were both incriminating and a surprise.

"Well," he growled with a shrug, "I cannot see what you are going to do about it, even if I did. If the Bardonians are fools enough to leave their borders unguarded, and are unable to protect what is theirs, they must expect such things. But enough of that. What I want to know is who are you, and what do you intend doing with us?"

"I am taking you back to the Purple City for trial," I told him. "You will be given a fair one, I promise you—much fairer than a Bardonian could hope for, were he on trial for a similar offense in your own capital.

"But I can also promise you will be under a close scrutiny," I added, for the eyes of the two men had met in a quick glance, "and that at the first attempt to escape I will complete the beating I have so well begun. Remember," I concluded, "that I am just waiting for some excuse."

As I spoke, my two companions appeared, breathing heavily. There was no sign of the third.

"He escaped us, Prince," cried one. "The fellow had the speed of a young kang. He dashed away as though a hundred devils were at his heels, and is doubtlessly making for the near-by Thovian capital at this very minute, to bring the help that will release his comrades and capture us."

Plainly there was not a minute to be lost. The tales we had heard of Thovian torture were enough to make us realize what to expect, were we to be taken by them. Tying the prisoners, we lashed them securely to the backs of two of the kangs, and transferred our own riding-equipment to fresh mounts. A meager meal was then hastily swallowed, the fetters of the kangs untied, and we had begun that ill-fated journey homeward.

All that day we pushed on as fast as the herding of the young kangs would allow. The nervous, wiry creatures seemed to go in every direction but the right one, and the constant riding back and forth, made necessary to head them off, was not only tiring to the mounts we rode, but to ourselves as well.

Night found us still several miles from the borders of our own country, and almost ready to drop from fatigue; so it was a tired little party that finally went into camp—a hungry little party as well, for by this time our scanty supplies had been consumed. I volunteered to remain on guard, and a few minutes later the others were in a deep slumber.

The hours passed slowly; then along toward dawn one of the warriors arose to relieve me while I sought a few precious moments of sleep. It was a rest I had long looked forward to, as many hours had passed since I had known slumber, but even then it was to be denied me. It seemed I had scarcely closed my eyes before I felt the hand of the warrior on my shoulder, and heard his voice in my ear.

"Arise, Prince Jan," he was saying. "A great party of mounted men are in the distance, and riding swiftly toward us."

I sprang to my feet. It was early morning, and in that clear light the moss-covered waste was visible for miles. Ahead of us rose the great mountain range we sought to reach—our borders. A two-hour journey should see us in our own country once more. But far away on the horizon behind was that which at once

centered my attention, a great company of mounted men whose identity needed no two guesses: Thovian warriors seeking to aid their comrades and capture us!

There was but one course, and I took it.

"Release the kangs and ride!" I shouted. "We must try to reach the mountains before they are upon us. It is our only chance. Once there we can find a hundred hiding-places among the hills that lie within the cliffs."

"If you can reach them, Bardonian," taunted the bearded captive from where he lay, for already he had seen the distant warriors, and guessed their meaning. "If you can reach them. And I'll wager my life against a dead kang's hoof that high noon finds our positions changed, with you the prisoner and me the captor."

He turned to the other. "It means rescue, comrade! It means our rescue!" he cried.

"Perhaps," I answered, raising the bound man to his feet, and lifting him to the back of his mount. "But I promise it will be one you will never live to know."

ANOTHER moment and we were all in our saddles. Then with the little herd galloping before us we set off toward the mountain range which, could we reach it in time, might prove to be our haven. Of course we could not hope to equal the speed of our pursuers, handicapped as we were with the herding of the young kangs, but the pace we set was certainly a fast one, and at the end of an hour's time we rode out of that great waste to the dusty, boulder-strewn ground that was the last stretch between us and our goal.

Away on the horizon to the south was a far-flung mass of crumbling grandeur that had been a mighty city, thousands upon thousands of years ago—a city similar to the countless other ruins that dotted the invasion-scarred surface of our ravaged world. It was these that told of the many millions, and the wonderful civilizations our planet had once known; these and the hoary legends of the ancients that gave us our only knowledge of the past; though later, on a distant world, I was to see the history of my planet slowly unfolded on a glittering, magical mirror, while beside me the glorious Queen of the Stars interpreted the various scenes.

All this while the Thovian horde had been steadily gaining, till at length we could plainly hear the clanking of their weapons and equipment. The many hours of travel were beginning to show on the beasts we rode, and now as their speed continued to lessen and the warriors came nearer, a roar of triumph arose from the ranks behind as they realized our mounts were weakening.

By this time I had given up all hope of finding safety in the mountains ahead. Even if we were able to reach them, there would be no time to hide ourselves and our little herd before the Thovians would be upon us. Another ten minutes was all they needed. That this was realized by the two who rode beside me was evident by their continuous glances backward, and their half-unsheathed weapons.

For my own part I had decided not to go into the hereafter alone. I would at least see how many of those shouting fiends I could take with me. I knew that my end would be a blow to my royal sire, but I felt that his grief would be somewhat tinged with pride upon learning of how I had attempted to avenge his subjects.

And so, as that howling horde came closer and the drumming hoof-beats told the nearness of death, I hardened my heart, and drawing my longsword, set myself for the supreme struggle. For an

instant it had come to me that by holding the bearded one at my sword's end I might force the Thovians to at least a temporary halt.

But this was just as quickly abandoned as I realized that my captive was of no special importance, and that it was our herd, our mounts and our own lives that the warriors sought, rather than the succor of their comrades.

And then occurred that startling interruption. The leading Thovians were within twenty yards of us when there came the thunderous roar that caused the very air to tremble and sent a dozen kangs and riders tumbling to the earth, while the survivors of that sudden onslaught forgot all else as their eyes shot skyward to seek its terrible meaning.

There, floating lightly in the cloudless blue, a hundred feet or so above us, was a gigantic, black, cylindrical mass of metal that I knew to be a space-ship, though I never before had seen one. Behind it came another, and then another—some seven in all. There was no visible sign of life on either the foremost ship or any of the others, yet I felt that at that very instant, from the metal depths of each of those mighty monsters, thousands of unseen, cruel eyes were glaring down upon us.

There was no time for a closer observation. Even as we watched, another roar of flame and smoke burst from the leading ship, to bring swift and terrible death to that barbaric horde below, and sent me reeling, bleeding and unconscious, backward from my mount.

Yet in that fleeting instant I had guessed the identity of the newcomers, had realized who it was that manned those mighty metal monsters. And even as I sank to earth and all grew dim and hazy, I knew that once again the Black Raiders had returned to our planet!

And then a pain shot through my head, the world spun crazily around, and I sank to a dark oblivion.

3. The Black Raiders

IT WAS the heat of the noonday sun upon my upturned face that aroused me some three hours later. At first I was conscious of only the throbbing pain in my head that temporarily obliterated all else, but presently became aware of the heavy form across my legs—the luckless kang that had been my mount when the Raiders fired upon us.

Gingerly my hand went to my head. The wound it felt proved to be but a slight, though painful gash that had furrowed the flesh across the temple. It had stopped bleeding, but the dried and clotted blood smeared my hands and face to present the gory appearance that doubtlessly convinced the Raiders I had been killed outright if, indeed, the ebon ones had bothered to land and inspect their victims.

Pushing the dead kang from me, I rose slowly to my feet, hardly knowing where I was or what I should do next. All around me the ground was strewn with the lifeless forms of men and kangs in every conceivable position, the first of the many thousands who were so soon destined to know death. Near by lay the two Bardonian warriors who had been my companions, slain along with the others before they could as much as strike a blow in their defense.

For a while I searched among the bodies in the hope that there might be others who still lived, but it was evident I had been the lone survivor. So terrible had been that deadly fusillade that many of its victims were mutilated beyond recognition.

But what of those who had caused their destruction? Doubtlessly they were repeating the slaughter on a much larger scale at this very moment. It was that which aroused me to immediate action. I

had no mount, of course, nor any means of transportation other than my own two legs, and it was a journey that would require many hours on foot. But there seemed to be no other way and every minute counted; so tightening my sword-belt and securing my weapons around me, I set off at a rapid trot towards the now near-by mountains.

Would I be in time to aid my people? I hoped against hope. The primitive arms of the Bardonians, as well as those of the other tribes of our planet, could hardly be expected to cope with the terrible weapons of the Black Raiders that spat fire and death from a distance, nor would the inhabitants of the Purple City be prepared for any such attack. At least I would be in time to avenge them, and in my rage it seemed I was equal to the task of slaying a hundred of the invaders.

Finally, after what seemed endless ages, I topped the mountain, and at a fast run began to descend the long, lumpy slope on its farther side, toward the distant bushes that arose at its base. My sandals of skin gave a firm foothold everywhere, and at length I had reached the bushes and was about to break through their thick growth, when my eyes suddenly caught that which brought me to a sharp halt and caused me to bless the leafy screen that stood between.

There, lying on the dusty, boulder-strewn ground not a hundred yards from the mountain's base, was one of the great space-ships I had seen earlier that morning. Even at that first glimpse I had been amazed by their huge size, but it was not till now that I realized their almost unbelievable magnitude.

Although at that moment it was all a mystery to me, I was later to become familiar enough with these mighty rocket-ships to learn they were equipped with wings, propellers, a tail skid, landing-wheels and other conventional parts. In space these same parts were so designed as to disappear into the ship, while instead of being driven by the propellers, the great metal monster was shot along at a terrible velocity by jets of gasses streaming from the numerous nozzles in its tail.

But standing before the great space-ship was that which was of even more immediate interest—four Black Raiders laughing and talking in a carefree manner. Their closely croppped hair and beardless faces made it easy to distinguish their strong, aquiline features.

Though I loathed the very name of them, I must admit that almost without exception they were perfect physical specimens of manhood. Standing well over six feet, each wore the gold-encrusted leather trappings that barely concealed their sleek ebon hides beneath, shimmering with a blackness almost blue. Around the waist of each was strapped a long-sword, a shortsword, as well as a slender, glittering implement, the like of which I never before had seen; while their proud, intelligent faces and defiant, haughty bearing showed they realized their importance, and what, in truth, they really were—conquerors of planets and of space!

As I stood watching them, two of the Raiders began to saunter toward the near-by mountain, and in my direction, in the slow aimless manner of idle men who have no definite goal. Presently they were within earshot. Of course, I was well able to understand them, as their language is now ours. When the Black Raiders first came to our world, ages ago, they had compelled the conquered Earth folk to adopt their own speech, till in time it supplanted the mother tongues, and we present descendants knew no other.

The taller of the two was speaking:

"This is supposed to be our last stop between here and home. Let us hope so. An uninterrupted flight and we should arrive in time for the Great Games."

The other gave a laugh. "Only the Games?" he asked. "How about the three captive girls that will be yours on our arrival? Surely they are of as much interest as the Great Games?"

THE taller one smiled, then gazed around him. "It's a dreary little world, this one," he commented, "so unlike the warm fields and valleys of our own beloved planet."

"What else could you expect of these primitive Earth folk?" asked the other; "an uncouth, fast-dwindling race of barbarians, fighting constantly among themselves, who have not even a written language of their own. And yet I suppose we are as much to blame as any of the other worlds who invaded it in the past," he went on, "for our history shows that Earth once boasted a mighty civilization, and was well able to hold its own with any planet in warfare."

"Yes, yes," admitted the other impatiently. "I know all that, but it was ages ago. Surely they would have made some progress since then, had they not sunk to the mental level of the beasts they ride. No; I have no patience with them, nor are they numerous enough to give us an interesting fight. The sooner we release the Vapors of Vengeance and kill the lot of them, the better."

"Till then let us hope no wandering tribe comes this way," added his companion. "The fleet may not return for several hours, and there are only the four of us to guard the ship. In the meantime, perhaps it would be just as well if——"

That was all I wanted to know. For a time at least but four men guarded the ship, and at that very moment that same force was divided. Now was my chance. I had decided to gain an entrance to the space-ship, that I might behold the many wonders within, nor did I particularly relish the terms applied to my world by the Black Raiders. And so it was that the words of the speaker had scarcely left his lips before I whipped out both my longsword and shortsword, and leaping through the leafy vines shot out into the open and before them.

For an instant they both stared at me; then their hands flew to their weapons. But mine was the advantage of a surprise attack, and before the taller of the pair could set himself to meet me, my shortsword had been plunged into his throat to the hilt. In a flash I wheeled upon the other before he could escape, though to do him justice, he made no effort to flee. The man paused only to shout an alarm to the others, and then with an oath sprang fearlessly toward me.

The fellow was a splendid swordsman, and seemed to know every thrust and parry. But he was soon to find that there was still the occasional Earthman who had an even greater knowledge of the blade, for scarcely had our swords crossed before I nicked him, and a moment later he was being forced steadily backward—wide-eyed in fear, fighting desperately for his life, and wholly on the defensive.

From the tail of my eye I could see the others hurrying to his aid. It was this that spurred me to greater efforts. If I did not finish him within the next few seconds, it would indeed go hard with me, and I leaped forward to send the shower of cuts and stabs that terminated in the lightning-like thrust which found his heart, just as the other two flung themselves upon me.

And yet their mad rush was to prove more helpful than dangerous, for one of the Raiders ran full upon my sword at the first onset. Now we were even. The remaining warrior fought with all the bravery of despair, and our clashing blades rang out loudly. But I met his every thrust and stab with a faster parry and return. Then suddenly feinting the downward stroke that lowered his guard for a fleet-

ing instant, I whirled my blade in the vicious back-hand slash that decapitated the unfortunate black, and toppled him backward in a grotesque heap.

From the beginning of the encounter till the last of the Raiders fell lifeless before me, I doubt if three full minutes had elapsed.

Pausing only to sheathe my swords, I hurried toward the great space-ship, whose five open doorways were set at regular intervals in its thick metallic side. The words of the warriors had been enough to show their own uncertainty as to when the fleet would return, and at any moment those massive black ships might be appearing in the sky.

The huge bow of the space-flyer was toward me, and a dozen paces beyond it an open doorway led to a low-ceilinged chamber of innumerable glittering levers and instruments, of which I knew nothing, encircled by a score or more of tiny glass windows of an amazing thickness. This was the all-important pilot-room, and though I was later to become familiar enough with its many devices for a more detailed description, for a time at least it all was but a wonderful mystery to me.

Through this I passed at length, to come upon a room of such enormous size and weird construction as almost to defy description. At that first glimpse its great interior seemingly consisted of nothing but countless shelves, so designed as to rise in tiers from the floor to the ceiling, and running in numerous rows along its broad expanse. It was not till I drew nearer that I realized each was a narrow sleeping-cot. And then the next instant I had made the discovery that sent my hand flying to my sword-hilt, and snapped my eyes wide in surprise.

A thousand Black Raiders were slumbering on the little cots around me!

Yes, at least a third of the berths were occupied, and every sleeper lay in that same strange, death-like position, with arms enfolded on his chest. But what could it mean? Running from one side of the cots to the other, a stout strap securely held each occupant in place, and his ready weapons hung from the little ceiling a foot above him, that was the bottom of the berth overhead. Yet no one challenged my none too silent entry, nor did a single warrior arouse himself from slumber.

Then as I continued to stare at them, I became conscious of another inexplicable fact. No sound of breathing arose from the hundreds around me, nor was there the slightest noise to break that almost tomb-like silence.

A MINUTE passed, another followed while I stood there, uncertain as to whether I should retreat or continue. Was it possible they were all dead? Gingerly I stepped closer to one of the sleepers.

There was no sign of any wound or violence on his person; yet on the other hand those ebon features were as devoid of life as the metallic floor I trod, nor did the tapping of my fingers above his head bring about the slightest change.

But at length curiosity overcame good judgment, and with drawn shortsword I began a soft advance to the far end of the room, though to tell the truth my stealth could be attributed to amazement rather than caution. On past the rows of slumbering blacks I continued, and through a second hall of sleepers equally as large as the first, then past the tiny storeroom that seemed so wofully inadequate to supplying the sleeping thousands, and through numerous other, larger rooms of various purposes, till at last I came to the little red door at the far end of the ship.

There I paused for a moment. What lay beyond I could not guess, and yet it was that wish to know the unknown that urged me on. Placing my ear against the frail barrier, I listened for some sound

"No sound of breathing arose from the hundreds around him, nor was there the slightest noise to break that tomb-like silence."

that might warn of the presence of others. But no noise came from beyond its panels, so taking courage and with ready short-sword, I gave the door the sudden kick that sent it flying backward, and sprang into the room before me.

It was a low-ceilinged chamber, at one end of which an open doorway let in the warmth and sunlight without. In the center of the room were a dozen or more metallic slabs that rose some three feet from the floor. And lying across the surface of several of these were five human forms, clothed in the flowing white robes that barely revealed their yellow-hued features.

But directly before me, seated at a table strewn with flasks and vials, was that which at once centered my attention—a thick-set little black dwarf, scarcely four feet in height, with a head so large as to be a deformity. His jewel-encrusted trappings clearly revealed the tiny arms and legs, while his full, repulsively ugly face was

seared and marked by low passions and vices.

At my sudden appearance he half rose, then sat down again, his mouth open and his hand on the back of his chair.

"A hundred devils!" he kept on repeating. "A hundred devils!"

Then before I could answer him:

"The guards!" he shouted, leaping to his tiny feet. "Where are the guards? Where are the guards?"

The next instant he had broken into a mad dash for the doorway, his short legs striving frantically for speed. But a leap put me between him and the opening, and he ended his rush with a suddenness that equaled its beginning, halting but a pace or two before me.

"It is useless to call the guards," I told him quietly. "They are dead. I have killed them."

His eyes went wide. "All of them?" he gasped.

I nodded an affirmation.

"But what—what do you want?" he went on. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing," I answered, "but you can do something for me. You can tell me where the fleet has gone and whom it will attack."

"I don't know," he replied promptly, and there was a truthful ring in his voice. "The fleet has no set destination. It will cruise around for a time, killing the Barbarians and shelling their ruined cities; then presently it will return with the captives we will take with us to our own world."

"And what becomes of the captives then?" I asked him.

He looked at me for a moment before he spoke.

"It is hard to say," he answered at last, adding almost immediately: "But about yourself. Who are you who single-handed kills four of our best swordsmen, then boldly enters where none other than my own people have dared——"

"But the warriors," I interrupted. "The warriors in the other rooms, and these strange people here"—I motioned to the five figures on the near-by slabs—"they are all dead."

The little black man had been watching me as I spoke, as though still uncertain as to my intentions. Now, however, at my answering words, a faint smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"Dead?" he repeated, then he laughed. "No," he answered; "they are not dead. They have lain thus for days, and some of them for years, but they are not dead!"

4. Vapors of Vengeance

"NOT dead, yet some of them have lain thus for years!"

As the tiny black spoke those words, my features must have shown incredulity and surprise.

"They are not dead?"

"By no means," he went on softly. "Why should they be? These five here—yellow people—were kings and queens on a world of ice. We captured them some months back when we destroyed their distant star, but we did not kill them. That would have been stupid. Instead, they will be taken to our own mighty planet and forced to grace the great triumphal procession, along with the other royal captives we have captured on the many stars, in the march that will mark the return of the fleet—to be later sold as slaves and to serve the nobles of our world; though now, heavily drugged, they are unmindful of that future.

"And so it is with the warriors you saw in the other rooms—they too are but sleeping. It would take enormous quantities of food to feed the thousands of hardy fighters each space-ship carries. But what is far more important is the prevention of

the enforced idleness to so many warriors during the months of flight from planet to planet. It might lead to terrible things. To safeguard against this, they are each injected with a serum that whisks them into a trance-like state till we arrive at our destination and they are needed. A counteracting serum then immediately awakens them to life once more.

"The same applies on our return journey. They are aroused when we arrive at Capara. Those you saw in the other rooms were not needed to subdue this primitive little world; so to awaken them would be useless. Indeed, often expeditions requiring from three to five years carry thousands of warriors who are never used, and remain in a death-like slumber till the fleet returns to its own planet.

"We of this expedition have already been gone two years from the mother world," he added as an after-thought.

"But who are you?" I asked. "How does it come that you are so familiar with all this?"

"I am Vaxarus," he answered solemnly. "Vaxarus the phrenologist, stunted in growth, but mighty in intellect, physician to the royal captives and the warriors whose privilege it is to fight and die for her wondrous Majesty, Tara the Glorious, Queen of the Stars, Goddess of Goddesses, Ruler of Capara, of space and of planets!"

He pointed to a jewel-encrusted pendant hanging around his neck.

"This priceless gem," he went on, "denotes my high station—physician and phrenologist. It is I who guard the welfare of the Princesses and the other royal maidens, who, if they can meet with the high standards of beauty and intellect demanded, and be virgins and unsullied, are selected for that greatest of honors—to serve, in her palace of glittering gold, the blinding beauty who is our Queen—our white Queen!

"And surely it is only right that all others should serve us. Ours, the greatest of all the planets, was old when your own tiny world, as well as a hundred million others, was but a bubbling, molten mass. It is said that time itself began with the birth of the glorious Tara, and that that same great God—Time—mated with the coldness of outer space to produce the divine pair who were the parents of our race.

"This, then, was the beginning of the holy lineage that today is the heritage of every human of our noble race, whose supremacy is maintained, and can only be lasting, in the conquest and submission of such creatures as yourself, and the continuous victories over the many worlds around us.

"Not always, however, did we demand the submission of others. Once in the dawn of time my people were a loving, peaceful race, who dressed in flowing white robes, and thronged the great temples of prayer with smiling faces and happy hearts; gentle people who lived on a lovely world of sky-blue lakes and deep valleys, of irrigated, picturesque fields, of marble halls and cool green meadows and fragrant, waving orchards. It was a golden age of simplicity and contentment, one, perhaps, that neither our world nor any other will ever know again.

"But as the ages passed they brought great space-ships and strange, savage people from the other planets, seeking our destruction and death, till at last in righteous anger, Queen Tara ordered our billions to arm themselves and repel the invasions, and our learned ones to devise weapons of such terrible power that nothing could withstand them.

"With these the Black Raiders at first sought only to protect themselves and what was theirs. But with their many victories arose their avarice, and with the passing generations their dissipations and degeneracy as well. Then, encouraged by

their weapons, their space-ships and great numbers, they began sending out expeditions to the other worlds, to wrest whatever gold or riches the many planets might have, and bring their captured people to slave and serve our pleasures.

"From the first the invasions were successful, and swiftly won by our hardy warriors, who swept down all before them. Then as they continued, the many raids rewarded us with such an unbelievable wealth and power, that today ours is the mighty world that rules ten thousand planets; ours the ever-conquering world that brings such terror to the stars, and though with the passing centuries we have become drunk with power and careless, our victories but continue, and our riches and strength increase."

WHILE the words of the little phrenologist held me in an almost breathless interest, I could not but wonder why he was taking such pains to explain all this to me—me, an almost naked barbarian whom his own kind looked upon with such contempt and scorn. It was the faintest wandering of his eyes that warned me. Those tiny orbs had suddenly left my own to flash a glimpse through the doorway behind me, and as I wheeled at that ominous signal I beheld the sight which brought an involuntary gasp from my lips—a great space-ship settling quietly to the ground not a hundred yards away, from whose numerous doorways a thousand ebon warriors were streaming toward us!

In a flash I realized the ruse with which the wily black had tricked me. For long he had expected the return of the fleet, and cunningly managed to hold my attention till its arrival. And now with that awaited succor hurrying toward him, the short limbs of the phrenologist shot him into prompt and vigorous action.

Only for an instant did I stand there, staring at the oncoming blacks. But it was time enough. The stunted Vaxarus had sprung for the table even as I wheeled away from him. And now as my hand flew to my sword, and I sought to reach and bar the door to the charging warriors without, it was to hear him scream a command to halt, then enforce it in both a swift and painful manner.

The phrenologist had secured a slender, glittering, wand-like device, similar to those I had seen hanging from the belts of the four warriors earlier in the day, and was pointing it at me. The next instant, with a soft, whirring sound, a beam of green light shot toward me, and I felt that every muscle in my body was being rent asunder as I was brought to the sharp, agonizing halt, stopped in my tracks, unable to flick a finger.

"Don't touch him! Don't touch him!" Vaxarus was crying the words to the warriors pouring through the doorway. "The paralyzing ray is upon him, and to come in contact with his person is to share his agony. Bring fetters to secure the Barbarian when I release him from the power of the green beam."

Each instant was adding to the number of blacks within the room, as well as increasing my terrible torture; yet strive as I would I could not move, nor bring my muscles to obey my will. It was as though I had been suddenly turned into stone—my hand halfway to my sword-hilt, my left foot raised slightly in a statue-like rigidity—the same posture that had been mine when the green ray first fell upon me.

From all around came the laughs and taunts of the blacks, jeers that told they knew and enjoyed my agony. Half crazed with pain, through hazy eyes I could see several of them hurrying forward with lengths of rope and other fetters; though why they should wish to bind me in my present helpless condition I could not understand. Yet even as I wondered, there came the shouts of Vaxarus to take me

alive. Then came the sudden snap that vanished the green ray and returned me to normal once more. The next instant a wave of warriors sprang upon me, and I was borne backward to the hard floor of the space-ship.

And so it was that I became a captive of the Black Raiders, though lashing out in a savage fury, I sent the lusty, smashing blows that brought a crimson trickle to the chin of more than one ebon warrior, and caused several others to howl in pain. But though the account I gave of myself was surely a most worthy one, there were always fresh hands to take the place of those I fought off, and at last they overcame me by the mere weight of their numbers. Then they bound me—my hands behind my back and my feet trussed up to meet them.

Presently they raised me from the floor, and half dragging, half pushing, hurried me from the ship and into the open, and the wild din and confusion that prevailed there. All around us the space-ships had landed, and from their great interiors thousands of Black Raiders and their bound white-skinned captives—Earth folk!—were streaming into the open.

Pushing and shoving, wild-eyed and disheveled, they were hurried along. Only the youthful, the healthy and strong had been chosen by the invaders. The whips of the blacks were constantly falling on the backs of their prisoners, and the screams of young girls and women arose with the shouts of the conquerors.

Among the captives were hundreds of fettered warriors and chieftains—some from tribes so distant that their trappings were unknown to me. It was evident that even during the ten or more hours since they had landed, the blacks had been raiding and ravaging in the four corners of our planet. Many of the captives, grimy and bleeding, gave mute evidence to the fury of their resistance, but nowhere could I see a Bardonian, or the trappings of my own people.

Near by the tiny Vaxarus was talking excitedly to a trio of Black Raiders whose jewel-encrusted trappings and proud features plainly stamped their importance. At a gesture from the dwarf my captors hurried me toward them.

"This is he. This is he," the little phrenologist was saying. "He came to the ship and slew the four guards as though they were paper men. His mind was as an open book to me, and the impression of the struggle easily read."

The eyes of the three Raiders turned toward me.

"By the Beauty of Tara!" exclaimed one. "He is indeed a powerful fellow. And a great swordsman as well, you say? Then he should make rare sport for us at the Great Games. Who knows?" he added, turning to the others; "perhaps we have at last found a match for the mighty Metak himself."

"Another victim, you mean," said the second. "And it's an ill-will you must bear this poor Barbarian to suggest such a match. Why, the Commander would butcher him with the same ease as you conquer a captive maid."

"We might try putting him in the arena with a wild taggot," spoke the third, "or even a hairy man of Manator for that matter. But against our champion—ah, it would be a pity to kill one so young."

They all laughed.

"He is a Prince, as well," went on Vaxarus, "a Prince of some wild tribe known as the Bardonians. I read it all quite plainly. But we will wait till the Commander returns before deciding his fate. In the meantime," he spoke to the guards who held me, "confine him to the Ship of the Condemned till his presence is needed."

That was all. The fetters that bound my legs were then untied, and with my

arms still lashed behind me I was ordered to follow my guards, who led the way through the thousands assembled within the great circle that the landing space-ships had formed.

Around us were scenes that appeared as the wild creations of a nightmare. Amid shouts and curses the Black Raiders were forcing their terrorized captives into long lines, for the purpose of inspection, with a brutality that was horrifying. Up and down the ranks black officers were scrutinizing the prisoners with a speed and skill that told of long practise, pausing occasionally to throw a taunt at some warrior, or a gloating, meaning glance at an unusually comely maid.

Night was falling. Numerous torches had been lit, and the flashing weapons and jewel-encrusted trappings of the invaders, glittering in the torchlight, together with the long golden rays shooting from the many windows of the surrounding space-ships in the backgrounds, but further tended to add a weird, unearthly aspect to the wild din and confusion, occasionally punctuated by feminine shrieks and terrible laughter.

SOMEWHAT apart from the others was a tiny, black space-ship that seemed hardly capable of holding more than a score of people. Through its solitary doorway I was taken, handed over to the black warrior within, and the lock sprung behind me. The only light came from a slender glass-encased beam that ran the entire length of the low ceiling, to show six or more tiny cots similar to those I had seen in the great space-ship, as well as a narrow doorway leading to a room on the right.

At sword's point the warrior forced me before him to the far end of the room, where several iron rings protruded from the wall. One of these was snapped around the bonds that held my arms; then the black sheathed his blade and sat down on a cot near by.

"And what ill fate brings you to the Ship of the Condemned?" he asked presently. "Usually it is only our own warriors who know its interior."

"What kind fate will get me out of it is more important," I answered from where I stood, secured to the wall, "though my capture can be attributed to my own lack of vigilance, as well as the smooth tongue of Vaxarus."

The black gave a laugh. "Ah, he's a cunning little runt, the royal phrenologist. And it is that same slyness, perhaps, which has raised him high in the favor of Queen Tara, and made him one of the richest and most powerful men of our great world, as well as the owner of a harem of a hundred chosen beauties.

"As to your own future, I can at least tell you some of it. You will be held here till the return of Metak, our Commander, which should not be very long. It is he who will decide your fate, which, judging from your size and what the guards have told me, will doubtless mean being sent to the arena for the Great Games. But again, one can never be certain of the Commander, and he might order your immediate death."

"His word is, I take it, your sole law," I put in.

"On our expeditions from planet to planet, yes—for he is our greatest general, as well as our mightiest swordsman, and stands high in the Queen's council. It is Metak who, on rare occasions, even enters the arena to meet some hardy warrior who has distinguished himself, whom he soon dispatches with his invincible sword-play and skill.

"And it is the sure way to win the plaudits of our world—physical strength and bravery. Indeed it is that same lust to fight which causes us to lay aside our great rays and other weapons of destruction, and

meet the warriors of the other worlds on the fields of battle, armed with only swords and daggers like our foes. The paralysis-wand we each carry is used only when we are hopelessly outnumbered, or in the gravest danger. It is considered an act of cowardice for one of our race to use it otherwise."

I looked around the interior of the space-ship. The door at its far end, I reasoned, led to the pilot-room. Strapped to two of the cots were the silent forms of two Black Raiders.

"But this ship," I asked after a pause. "Why is it so small? It cannot possibly hold more than a score of captives."

"It is not meant to hold captives," informed the guard. "This, the Ship of the Condemned, is the dread of every warrior of our race. I am its pilot. A similar ship goes with every expedition that leaves Capara. In the months they spend on the different worlds away from home, any warrior found guilty of cowardice in battle, or some other grave offense, is sentenced to the Ship of the Condemned. That means he is never to know his homeland again, for when the fleet finally heads for the mother planet, the Ship of the Condemned makes for the moon of Capara, the tiny prison satellite but some fifty thousand miles from the homeland, which is known as the Moon of Lost Souls.

"There the poor unfortunates are compelled to toil on the great prison farms. There they are forced to labor in the dry, dusty fields as beasts of burden, till a merciful fate comes at last to release them from their sufferings.

"These two here"—he pointed to the two silent figures—"some months ago on a distant star they were found guilty of conduct unbecoming a Black Raider, once for cowardice in battle; the other time for treason. We have drugged them till the ship arrives at the prison colony, where they will begin their life of exile. Only the cowards and the traitors are sent to the Moon of Lost Souls; those and the most hardened of slaves who have become too unmanageable on Capara. They too are sent to toil on that Satellite of the Damned, till their spirits have been broken and they cry aloud for death.

"So no matter what sentence the great Metak passes upon you, Barbarian," he concluded, "remember that the arena, or even immediate death, is a thousand times better than a sentence to the tortures on the Moon of Lost Souls."

AS THE black ceased speaking a roar of voices suddenly sounded above the din without. To the right a window of thick glass revealed the numerous fires and torchlights of the near-by encampment. The next moment the cause of the shouting was evident. Descending from the blackness overhead was a glittering outline of lights, which I knew to be some great space-ship.

The black, whose gaze had followed mine, recognized it at once.

"It's the Vastus!" he exclaimed. "It's the flagship bearing our Commander. Let us hope it is laden with prisoners and plunder. At best Metak is none too patient, and doubly quick to find fault with anything if a trip has proven fruitless.

"You should soon know your fate, Barbarian," he added, turning toward me.

But the statement was to prove untrue, for hour after hour dragged slowly along with no sound other than the gradually subsiding din without. It must have been well past midnight when footsteps suddenly sounded, and the next moment Vaxarus, followed by four others, entered the doorway.

"To your station, pilot, to your station," he ordered. "You are to put off immediately for the Moon of Lost Souls."

The half-dozing pilot sprang to his feet.

"At once, Worthy One," he answered

promptly, and then: "But the fleet," he asked, "does it leave with us also?"

"At dawn," came the answer, while the others, hurrying to and fro, began making preparations for the departure. "This primitive world holds nothing of further value to us, nor is it worth any more of our time. Metak has ordered it destroyed. At dawn, then, the fleet will encircle it before turning homeward, releasing the Vapors of Vengeance as it does so; turning loose the poisonous red gasses that will penetrate to all corners of the planet, bringing a slow and agonizing death to every living thing upon it."

As he spoke, two of the Raiders had released me from the wall, and with arms still lashed behind me, carried and secured me to one of the cots with the strong straps encircling it. The black pilot noticed this.

"But the Barbarian?" he asked. "Surely he is not going with us. I thought he would be sent to the Arena."

"So did I," answered Vaxarus, "and looked forward to seeing him in battle. The Commander, too, at first approved of it, but when I mentioned that he was a Prince of some wild tribe known as the Bardonians, for some reason Metak's attitude suddenly changed, and he ordered his immediate exile to the Moon of Lost Souls.

"So that is to be your fate, Earthman," went on Vaxarus with a mocking smile, walking slowly toward me as his hands produced a glittering instrument with a needle-like point. "An exile for life on the prison farms. Say a farewell then to your own world, for in another thirty hours it will be as devoid of life as a burnt-out sun, and when next you open your eyes it will be upon the tiny Moon of Lost Souls, many hundred million miles away!"

Behind him the small crew of the Ship of the Condemned was watching us intently. With a wild surge I sought to break the bonds and straps that held me, but they were strong, and the next instant I felt a sharp twinge in my forearm, like the bite of a small insect.

That is all I can clearly remember. Almost instantly everything around me grew hazy. As in a dream, I heard Vaxarus laugh: "Farewell, Prince Jan of the Bardonians!" And then I knew no more.

5. The Prison Farms of Capara

IT WAS, as I afterward learned, the equivalent of a hundred and fifty days of Earthly time, when I came to myself on the Moon of Lost Souls, that terrible satellite of sorrow, hundreds of million miles away from the bright green star that was my own beloved planet.

During the many hours the serum of Vaxarus held me in a death-like coma, I had been as unmindful of my surroundings as one in a deep slumber, unmindful that every living thing had passed away upon the Earth, and that the green star was now as devoid of life as it had been at its creation. Nor did I realize that while I lay there the tiny ship that was my prison had been plunging through the awful void with the speed of a falling meteor.

I opened my eyes to gaze into the features of a burly Black who held a flashing instrument with a needle-like point, similar to the one I had seen in the hands of Vaxarus. Behind him were two others. As I came to myself the Black gave a grunt of satisfaction, then motioned the others toward me. These in turn slipped past him, and lifting me to my feet—for the straps that held me to the cot had been removed, though my arms were still secured—hurried me out of the ship and into the open and the amazing world around me.

As far as the eye could see, on all sides, was nought but a great plain that stretched away to the sky, a dry and dusty plain on which thousands of humans

toiled and strained under the flicking whips and watching eyes of black soldiery. Huge dust-clouds, constantly rising, marked the labors of the near-by toilers, as well as those on the far horizon, who appeared as tiny dots against the blueness of the sky. Later I was to find that almost the entire surface of the Moon of Lost Souls, with the exception of two great seas, was one vast unbroken plain, studded by the small white huts and barracks that housed the overseers and guards of this satellite of exile.

Even as we emerged into the sunlight I became aware of the winged forms shooting to and fro in the blueness overhead. At that first glimpse I thought they were huge birds, though a moment later I knew them for what they really were—winged, flying humans! These were the Tors, a timid, browbeaten race of bird-like men from a far-off planet, who served as both mounts and messengers to their captors, the Black Raiders.

The two Blacks who held me directed their steps toward a near-by white structure, with solid pillars on either side and an inscription across the lintel. This was the house of the Kamma, or Great Guard, the only voluntary exile on the Moon of Lost Souls. The Black overseers and guards, as well as the thousands of prisoners, were all exiles from Capara, though the Black officials took care that those of their own race were made guards and the superiors over the unfortunates who toiled in the fields.

As we neared the doorway, a stout Black with an air of authority appeared in the opening, frowning at our approach.

"Who is this one, who is this one?" he broke out in an irate tone. "Gods of my ancestors, will they never cease coming?"

"An Earthman, oh Kamma," explained one of my captors as we halted before him. "The last of the three the great Metak sent us from his expedition. The other two, fellow countrymen, have been put in the ranks with the other guards who watch the slaves beyond the Sea of Tears. This one here——"

"Oh yes," interrupted the other. "I remember now; I read the report. He killed four guards, then threatened the royal phrenologist himself." The Kamma turned an angry glare upon me. "Well, I can promise you will never kill another. We have a way here of taking care of just such as you, and I intend to make use of it. What I cannot understand is why the Commander did not have you dispatched immediately upon your capture."

"Metak has recommended hard labor," put in the guard.

"The words of Metak shall be obeyed to the fullest," went on the Kamma, his voice rising slightly, for all this time I had been meeting his glare with an unwavering gaze. "To the plows with him then—Calabar's plow—and you may tell the Terrible One that it is the order of his Kamma to use his whip often on this fellow, and to lay on with a will!"

That was all. With the guards clutching me on either side I was hustled out onto the hot, dusty plains, where a million prisoners from a thousand planets lived and died and labored, humans of every conceivable shape and color who were to be my associates in the following days; sturdy, thick-set little men of a standard thirty inches, who were the dwarfs of Panthra; frail and timid twenty-foot giants from an unnamed world of mist; the dog-men of Zaxona, whose speech consisted of various gestures, barks and whines; the beast-men of Yat; the skull people of Canaxis; weird and serpent-like men from a distant star who hissed and wiggled their rapid ways up and down the fields; all those and a thousand others, some so grotesque that even a description would be revolting.

Hanging in the heavens but some fifty

thousand miles away was the gigantic mother planet, Capara, whose great size made it appear so near one felt he should be able to hear the thunderous din of the ten billion power-crazed inhabitants, who laughed and debauched on its broad expanse. Despite the intervening void, the black outlines of mighty continents stood out upon the lighter hues that were its vast lakes and oceans. A second tiny satellite—it had two—and again as far from Capara as the Moon of Lost Souls, showed little better than a small black dot against the blueness of the sky.

Everywhere strange shapes and forms were pursuing their arduous labors under the eyes of brutal guards. Indeed, the entire Moon of Lost Souls was but one gigantic farm that supplied the mother planet, and countless air transports and freighters were constantly coming to and from Capara, whose own fair fields had been deemed too lovely for toil and agriculture. Many fields therefore on the Moon of Lost Souls knew the harvester, while a thousand miles away others were knowing the plow; and it was to slave with a crew that was one of the many that drew those heavy implements that destiny had chosen as my lot.

PRESENTLY five almost naked humans, begrimed and straining, came slowly toward us, struggling against the leashes attached to a heavy plow, on whose seat a huge Black forced them on with loud oaths and a long-lashed whip. This was Calabar, the Terrible One—a burly brute of a man, whose cruelties had distinguished him, even among that heartless clique who were the guards on the Moon of Lost Souls.

As he came abreast of the guards who held me, he roared a halt to the poor devils he drove, and as the exhausted men dropped to the ground, glad of a brief respite, turned two inquiring eyes upon us.

"Another one for you, Calabar," called out the guard. "A big powerful fellow this time, and the Kamma says you need not spare the whip."

The gaze of the huge Black went to mine. "I can use him," he answered in a deep voice. "My front slave, a yellow man, gave out on me this morning. Put this one in the foremost place, then, and I will soon teach him the rest," and he tossed a thick leather collar toward us.

Before leaving the Ship of the Condemned my trappings and sandals had been taken from me, and I was given a scanty loin-cloth to hide my nakedness—the apparel of the slaves who worked the farms. The five before me were chained neck to neck on a long slave-chain secured to the heavy plow. A few more links were now pulled through the ring of each collar, the end of the chain attached to the one around my own throat, and the ancient padlock sprung shut. The bonds that held my arms were then untied, and with the huge Black shouting at us the plowing was resumed once more, and I had begun my sentence on the Moon of Lost Souls.

All that long day I and the five who were my companions in toil pulled the great plow through the hard, dusty soil, that stretched away to the far horizon. All that day we endured the heat and the grime of the field, as well as the falling lash of our driver, with neither food nor drink.

Several times Calabar left his seat the better to punish one he fancied was not giving his best to his work, and once he approached me with uplifted whip. But there was something in my eyes that kept it from falling, and so in silence and misery the little plow crew toiled on with the many others who worked the seemingly endless fields of that terrible satellite.

At dusk Calabar roared a halt and swung from his seat. I looked around me in the gathering twilight. As far as the

eye could see, the thousands of toilers had ceased their work and were lying on the hard ground, while the Black overseers were gathering together in little groups, laughing and talking; nor was it much later till a hundred of the flying men—Tors—came winging overhead, and dividing into pairs, brought the evening meal to the hungry wretched awaiting them.

The two that alighted and came forward to serve us were typical specimens of their race. Dressed in the leather trappings of the Black Raiders, their dull, lemon-colored skins, their frail arms and legs and hairless heads, together with their trembling, high-pitched voices, presented an outstanding contrast to their burly, domineering captors. The huge, membranous, bat-like wings gave the weird, bird-like appearance, made but the more pronounced by their sharp aquiline features.

Each carried the two pails that contained our food and water—the former a thick, stew-like substance, not unpleasant to the taste—while from their waists hung numerous copper bowls.

As we were being served, one of the winged men whispered to me: "You are the Earthman?" he asked in a low tone, looking fearfully toward the near-by Calabar who was talking with the others.

I nodded from where I sat, looking up into the large eyes that were watching me with the frightened, puzzled stare of a trapped animal.

"Yes," I began. "But how does——"

"Sh—" he cautioned, making a pretense at refilling my bowl. "We must be silent till Calabar leaves."

Just what he meant by that I was not certain, but presently the huge Black gave the sharp whistle that sent the second bird-man winging toward him, while from all around a score of others began flying toward the guards. A moment later Calabar had climbed upon the back of the Tor, while the guards mounted the others; then with their huge wings flapping loudly, the bird-men rose into the air, and toward the distant barracks that were the quarters of the guards.

As they disappeared a murmur ran through the men behind me, and their eyes turned to the remaining bird-man.

"Refill the bowls, Tor!" growled one. "Refill the bowls!" In an instant the words were taken up by the others, while the timid bird-man, coming forward, worked feverishly to meet their demands.

"He will be punished for this, perhaps, but we must eat," explained the one behind me. "The Tors are expected to use but a certain amount of food for each feeding, and he can only explain the shortage by saying he fell and spilled our rations. It will doubtless mean five lashes for him, but better that than a broken neck at the hands of the prisoners."

Presently the bird-man reached me.

"You wish your bowls refilled, Prince Jan?" he asked.

I stared at him.

"How is it you know my name?" I answered.

"Do not be angry with me, Prince Jan," he went on; though I had neither raised my voice nor given the slightest indication of anger, "but I was arranging the reports in the office of the Kamma a sun's width ago, and read the one that was sent in by Vaxarus. It mentioned you, and said you had killed four of the Raiders."

"And by that I have earned your hatred?" I asked.

"By that you have earned my respect, Prince Jan. You have done what I wished a thousand times that I could do. But we are not a race of fighters, we Tors. Ours was a planet of peace and kindness, whose people lived only to help each other, and to whom war was but a hideous, terrible word. So when the Black Raiders came to our world it was easily subdued, our cities burned, and most of my people taken to

Capara, to serve as the mounts and slaves of our conquerors, while I and a hundred more were sent here. So it is no wonder that the heart of Abel is bitter against the Black Raiders, and that he rejoices when any ill befalls them?

"But the bowls," he went on after a pause; "you will want them filled, Prince Jan?"

"No," I smiled. "No, Abel; I do not want you to be punished on my account. But why is it you have not escaped? You are not chained, and you have your great wings."

"Where could I hope to go, Prince Jan? The entire moon is but one great farm that supplies the mother planet, and Black guards are everywhere. That is why the prisoners are not watched at night. There would be no place they could flee to if they did try an escape, and they could only hope to gain some terrible torture for such an act.

"Why, if the Blacks thought I ever contemplated flight, they would have my wings severed."

"QUITE right, Tor," spoke one of the men who had been an attentive listener. "And you had better banish all thoughts of escape, Earthman. Neither here nor on any other world can one be safe from the Black Raiders."

"Except the Moon of Madness," put in another.

"The Moon of Madness?" I asked.

"Capara's second satellite," explained Abel, pointing to a tiny moon in the void overhead, for night had now fallen. "For some strange reason the Black Raiders fear that moon and will not go near it, though they have conquered all the near-by stars, and worlds five hundred million miles beyond it. Why, I do not know, but it must be something ghostly and terrible, for though indifferent to danger, and even death itself, the Black Raiders tremble when the name, the Moon of Madness, is mentioned."

"I can tell more," put in one of the others, for by now the little plow crew had gathered close, "something that is known to only a few, other than our captors. It is said that many years ago a space-ship of the Black Raiders was caught in a terrible space-storm, and forced to land upon the Moon of Madness. Years passed, during which it was all but forgotten. Then one day one of the Black fleets came upon it again, far out in the trackless void — a lonely drifting derelict. But the Commander of the fleet ordered its destruction, and the great ray-guns turned upon it, for it is an ancient law of the Black Raiders that any ship or person that has known the Moon of Madness be immediately destroyed.

"But it was not destroyed before three brave young officers swung the flyer they commanded alongside the space-ship, and entered it through a small door in its bow, while without, the others waited. Then suddenly, amid terrible screams, the three staggered back through the doorway and into their own ship, wild-eyed, mouths contorted, and gibbering like idiots. Whatever terrible horror they had seen, they were never able to tell, for it had robbed them of their reason."

His voice sank to a whisper.

"The story has it also that from within the ship there came chuckling laughter and a terrible tapping sound, like the tread of one who was neither man nor beast!"

"Do—do you believe it?" asked one after a pause.

The other shrugged. "I hardly know, but it is said to be a true story, and whatever evil thing it was, it could have been spawned nowhere else but upon the Moon of Madness."

Soon after that Abel gathered up the bowls and empty food-pails and fled toward the great kitchens that were also the

quarters of the Tors, while the little plow crew stretched themselves upon the ground and sought slumber; for there were no huts or sleeping-quarters for the prisoners who worked the farms on the Moon of Lost Souls, only the great fields in which they labored through the long hours of light, that knew them also in the darkness that accompanied their slumber-tossed dreams.

Nor was it much later till the poor exhausted devils were all in a deep sleep, and for a time at least unmindful of their sufferings. But sleep did not come so easily to me, nor did I court it. For hours I lay there, with the rhythmical breathing of the others around me, looking upward at a million stars, and the near-by giant mother planet, Capara, that covered half the heavens—already planning escape and vengeance on the conquering Black hordes.

And despite the awful odds against it, an escape from the Moon of Lost Souls was soon to be mine. Yet I dare say, that could I have foreseen the wild future before me, I would have considered the prison farms of the Black Raiders as nought other than a safe and friendly paradise.

6. A Break for Liberty

AT DAWN the Tors came flying into the fields with the morning meal, nor was it much later till the guards themselves appeared. With them came Calabar, who ordered us to our feet. Again we rose to throw ourselves against the sturdy leashes, and with the huge Black shouting at us the plowing was resumed, and that inhuman labor taken up once more.

For ten days I toiled in the great fields on the Moon of Lost Souls. For ten days, along with a million captives from a thousand planets, I endured the heat and horror of that terrible prison satellite. I could tell of the many grotesque creatures the Black Raiders had captured on the various stars and forced into a life of slavery. I could tell of the many brutalities of the guards in general, and of Calabar in particular, that transformed brave and spirited men into weak and whimpering cowards—but enough! Even now they come in dreams to haunt me.

At nights I would lie in my chains on the great fields of exile, hearing the groans and the troubled dreams of those around me.

Again and again I asked myself that seemingly inexplicable question: "Why had the Commander of the fleet, Metak, ordered me sentenced to the Moon of Lost Souls, rather than to the Great Games and the arenas of Capara? There could have been no personal enmity, as the Black leader had never even seen me; nor did it seem possible that my existence before my capture could have been known to him.

But for that matter, why to a score of other questions? Why should any of us be here at all? Why had it been decreed that the Black Raiders should conquer a thousand planets? Why should that gigantic world, hanging so close above us as to obliterate half the heavens, be the unchallenged master of all others? Ever since my arrival on the Moon of Lost Souls, in the forbidden whispers of the prisoners and loud banter of the guards, I had heard of nothing but the wonders of the great mother planet, Capara; of the luxuries and pleasures to be had upon its broad expanse, and of the glorious Queen who was its supreme ruler.

While I could not be certain as to the truth of all the tales I heard, they were enough to confirm that it was indeed a planet of uncensored vice and pleasure—the Eden for the debauchée. A world of ten billion people, drunk with power, with wine and riches given over to a life of continuous dissipations, and ruled by a white Queen who reigned in a palace of glittering gold! A Queen of such inde-

scribable blinding beauty, as to be almost terrifying! A Queen who was said to have been present at the birth of time itself!

And then one dusk there occurred that which changed everything. It was the evening of the tenth day, after long hours at the plow, when there happened the first of a series of incidents that were to lead to such a startling climax.

All this time, despite its apparent hopelessness, I had not relinquished any thoughts of escape, and I was sure that others could be relied upon at the first opportune moment. The five who worked with me—yellow men from a distant world of ice—were all seasoned warriors and powerful fellows, as indeed they had to be, to stand the hardships of those who drew the plow of Calabar.

I might add here that all prisoners on the Moon of Lost Souls spoke the language of the Black Raiders. When the ebon ones conquered a world it was their custom to compel the inhabitants to adopt their tongue, as they had done to my own planet ages ago; so that while some of the captives were from stars so distant as to be invisible to the naked eye, their speech was readily understood.

And then on the evening of the tenth day, as Calabar passed me on his way to a waiting Tor and the distant barracks, chance sent the key that unlocked our slave collars tumbling from his belt and directly before me. The Black continued on, unaware of the loss, nor did any of the others notice the incident. The next moment the key had been concealed within my loincloth.

DURING our hours of steady plowing we covered a considerable area that took us to the various sections of the different fields, and when we halted that evening it could not have been more than half a mile from one of the great barns that dotted the Moon of Lost Souls. It was in these massive storehouses that the harvests of the field were baled and kept, awaiting transportation to Capara. It was before them also that the huge space-freighters landed to take on the mighty cargoes they would carry to the mother planet.

I had noticed that most of the ships, especially those arriving late in the afternoon (one had recently landed, and its crew were busily loading its huge interior in the waning sun rays) would invariably delay their departure till the following dawn, and it was this that prompted me to the course I had been planning for several days.

Twilight had been hurried into darkness by the appearance of black clouds. There, together with the gradually rising wind, the angry rumbling and occasional flashes in the void overhead, told of an oncoming storm, but I felt that it could be to our advantage.

I made no immediate mention of the key, but shortly after, as Abel served the nightly rations, I beckoned him and the five others around me. The guards had departed to the barracks, and only the prisoners remained in the fields—they and a few of the Tors who were busy gathering up the bowls, preparatory to leaving—but I spoke in a low tone, for several other plow crews were near by, among whom might well be one eager to hurry to the guards with any information.

"Another of the freighters," I began, pointing to the outline of lights in the distance. "It has been loaded, but will doubtless remain till dawn, while its crew drink and revel with the guards in the barracks. That means the ship will be ill guarded this night. What is to stop us from taking it over?"

There were a few gasps and a brief pause, then: "The guards, for one thing," spoke one.

"These, for another," said a second,

pointing to the collars that held us to the slave-chain.

"But suppose you were freed from them?" I went on. "Suppose I could promise to unlock your collars? How many of you would follow me to the ship? How many of you, if you had the chance, would bear arms against the guards; would cut down those who watch the ship, and attempt that which has yet to be accomplished—an escape from the Moon of Lost Souls?"

And I withdrew the key I had secreted in my loin-cloth, and held it up before them.

As my voice died away, a death-like stillness settled over those around me, for the thing I suggested was almost unheard of. True, several times in the past daring captives had attempted to escape from the Moon of Lost Souls, but they had always been speedily captured and their punishment was so terrible that by now even a mention of the word, flight, brought a shudder from the prisoners.

The five yellow men sat as though turned to stone, the eyes of each roving from one to another. Despite the many tales of torture, however, there was no sign of fear among them; I was quick to realize that. A moment passed. They were but waiting for one of their number to take the initiative. It was the one beside me who spoke first; a grim and grizzled old warrior I felt I could rely upon.

"You can count on me, Earthman," came his low tone. "You can count on me to the last. They will probably get us before we have gone a mile, and it is more than likely that we shall never even see the inside of the ship. But at least we can try, and anything is better than the slow living death here."

It was enough. The next minute, all of them, together with Abel, the bird-man, were voicing their willingness to follow me and share in the rash venture—raising such a clamor in fact, that I half feared the sudden din would attract the other inmates of the field.

"But how do you propose to go about it, Earthman?" one of them was asking presently.

"In a way that will require the help of every one of you," I answered, then turned to the bird-man beside me. I knew that the others weren't over-pleased that he was to be one of us, for the Tors are a notoriously timid race, and in truth we had need for only fighting-men. But I could not find it in my heart to leave poor Abel, no matter how much of a burden he might prove to be.

"You have said that you Tors are allowed to come and go from your quarters whenever you please," I asked him, "and also that when a freighter puts in for the night most of the crew spend the hours in drinking at the barracks with the guards?"

The other nodded.

"You should not find it hard then, to slip from your quarters and let us know when they are well filled, and vigilance is lax."

"I can do it, Prince Jan, I can do it!" cried Abel, eager and thrilled that his services were needed. "I can wait till they have become fuddled with wine, then hurry to you. It will not be hard."

"Good," I answered. "Once we are sure of the guards, it will be a simple matter to free ourselves."

IT WAS then agreed to wait till we had heard from Abel, and with a few parting instructions to him, we watched the bird-man rise into the night and fly toward the glittering lights in the distance. Once he returned to tell us all was well, it was my plan to make for the great freighter, and with a sudden rush surprise and overpower its guards, then piloting the ship ourselves (two of the yellow men had

said they could handle her), put off for any destination that would place many miles between us and the Moon of Lost Souls.

An hour passed—a second, then a third. The wind that had been gradually rising was now whistling wildly over the fields, while the poor toil-worn wretches below huddled together, some for warmth, others in terror, for volleys of thunder were constantly rumbling, with lightning flashes splitting the sky, and to many of the prisoners a storm of such violence was almost unknown.

Then came the rain, loud, sweeping gusts, a veritable deluge, bent on drowning all before it, and obliterating vision with the fury of its downpour.

But it was neither the rain, the lightning nor the wind that was foremost in my mind that night. Why did not Abel return as he had promised? I had the utmost faith in the loyalty of the bird-man, and was certain that his absence was no fault of his own. At length, after another hour had dragged its course, I could stand it no longer, and turned to the wet and dripping men beside me.

"Something has happened. Something had gone wrong," I told them, shouting so that my words could be heard above the fury of the storm. "The Tor should have been here an hour ago."

"He might have become frightened," cried one of them, shielding his eyes and blinking at me through the rain. "He might have decided the risk was too great, and left us to get along without him."

I shook my head. "No," I answered, "it is not that; it is something else. He would be here if he could."

"But what about us? What had we better do?" asked the other.

I unlocked the collar that held me to the slave-chain, then handed the key to the speaker.

"Stay here," I told him. "The guards may be aware of the plan and waiting for us. If so, there is no need why you should all suffer. I will go and see what has happened to the bird-man. If I do not return within an hour, you will know I have been taken, and the venture best dismissed as useless."

Then before a protest could be voiced, I had wheeled and was off.

At a fast trot I started toward my goal, my bare feet sinking ankle-deep into the ooze of the storm-swept field at nearly every step, my almost naked body a target for the wind and rain. The greatest danger, of course, lay in the unknown darkness that might send me running into some waiting guards, or toppling over another plow crew, whose outcries could easily mean discovery. Several times I heard the rattling chains of some crew near by, and once, faintly, a sound of voices to the left. But no shout or challenge came to halt me, and I gradually drew nearer to the great structure ahead.

At length a golden twinkle shone through the rain, and a moment later I was halting beside the huge storehouse that held the products of the fields, its massive outlines occasionally illuminated by flashes of lightning. The constant thunder and whistling winds deadened any sound of my approach, nor did it seem probable that a sentry would be abroad on such a night.

Pausing to regain my breath, I rested, then continued on to round the corner of the building, and stepped directly into the path of an oncoming Black guard —Calabar!

IT IS a question which was the most surprised. For a moment we stared at each other; then: "Blood of a Thousand Beasts!" he roared—"you?"

The next instant his hand went to his sword-hilt, while his mouth flew open to shout an alarm.

It was never uttered. My hands shot out and were around his throat even as he attempted it. Together we fell to the ground. Calabar was a huge and powerful man, but my own strength had long been the boast of my people. Wildly he sought to free himself from my death-grip. Stubbornly I clung to it. The Black fought furiously but futilely. My fingers tightened. Swiftly and silently the life was choked from him. His dark eyes bulged, his tongue protruded to dislodge me, and a moment later there came a convulsive tremor of his stiffening muscles, and the Terrible One lay quite still.

Quickly I looked around, but none had witnessed that little tragedy. Raising the dead Calabar, I threw his limp form upon my shoulder, then hurried into the doorway of the great storehouse. Among the bales of its dark interior I had soon stripped the body and donned the handsome leather trappings and sandals, after first discarding the filthy loin-cloth that had been my only apparel. Then with the longsword and shortsword of my victim buckled around my waist, I crept toward the doorway to resume my search for the bird-man.

Directly ahead was that which claimed my attention—the freighter I had seen loading earlier in the day. A faint glow glittered from its open doorway, but there was no sound to betray any occupancy, and I was on the verge of leaving my shelter and gliding toward it, when my gaze suddenly raised to behold that which snapped my eyes wide in surprise and sent me leaping back into the darkness of the storehouse.

Shooting downward from the blackness overhead was a gigantic space-ship, its massive outlines agleam with lights, cutting swiftly through the storm with a well-armed crew of thousands, and preparing to land upon the ground not twenty paces from me!

7. *Vonna*

I DOUBT if twenty seconds could have passed from the time I first saw the ship until the great space-flyer had landed —halting its mad rush at the last minute, to right itself, then settle noiselessly upon the storm-swept ground.

But that fleeting interval had not found me idle. Despite the blackness within the storehouse it was not hard to find my way. The whole interior was piled high with huge bales running in rows the entire length of the vast structure, between which were numerous narrow passageways. Into the nearest of these I hurried, and with the wall on one side of me continued on for a dozen paces or so, to halt before a slight chink in the wood that gave an unobstructed view to the night without, and the new landed space-ship.

It was evident the descent of the latter had not gone unnoticed. Even as I halted, several shouts sounded from the barracks, and forms came hurrying through the rain. The next instant the doors of the space-ship were flung open to send long vistas of light streaming into the darkness, and dislodge a thousand black warriors who came swarming into the open. Loud laughs and greetings passed between them and the guards.

And there I stood, wondering what I had best do next and how I could find Abel, while scarcely twenty paces from me hundreds of guards and warriors were streaming past. It was all-important that I see the bird-man, and yet I could not show my nose without being taken prisoner. It came to me also, that Abel might not have been discovered, but was unable to leave the barracks, and that any mistake on my part would not only cost me my life, but his own as well.

Yet I must do something. Crouched in the shadow of a grain bale, I made a thousand plans, each more dangerous than the

last, and was balancing one against the other when a hurrying of footsteps sounded above the din without. In an instant I was at the chink to behold the warriors stiffening to attention. A tall figure whose glittering, jewel-encrusted trappings and proud features stamped his importance, appeared in the open doorway of the ship and looked frowningly into the storm.

A guard came running through the rain to halt, panting, and with an arm held out before him in salute.

"The Kamma sends a thousand welcomes, noble Magog, and asks that the son of Metak follow me to his quarters, where the questioning of a Tor detains him——"

The other nodded. "I come, I come," he broke in. He turned and flung a few unintelligible words over his shoulder, then at a fast run followed the guard through the rain toward the Kamma's quarters, while behind him the rest of the ship's crew hurried into the open, making for the barracks.

A thrill shot through me at the words of the guard. I felt certain that the Tor he mentioned was Abel, nor had the identity of the ship's Commander been uninteresting. This then was the son of Metak —Metak who alone was responsible for my being on the Moon of Lost Souls— Metak the cruel, and champion swordsman of the Black Raiders. And now the son of the man who had caused the death of every living human upon my planet, as well as my own exile, was scarcely a hundred paces away. My hand crept to my sword and toyed with its heavy hilt.

The many lights streaming from the space-ship prevented my leaving the front of the storehouse, but the rear of the great structure seemed temporarily deserted and every minute counted; so turning into a passageway I hurried through its sinister gloom, and a few minutes later found myself at the far end of the building, directly before a small door secured by wooden bars upon the side of my approach. I opened it and stepped out into the storm.

As I had expected, the back of the storehouse was deserted, but directly ahead was an outline of lights, surrounded by a low wall that I knew to be the office and quarters of the Kamma; while on its far side, and some distance beyond, rose a much larger structure that was the barracks itself. In a half-crouch I hurried forward, and a moment later found myself beside the white wall that encircled the building—a barrier some seven feet in height.

This, however, was no great obstacle. With a running leap I sprang upward and grasped a secured hold on its top; then, observing no one in the surrounding darkness, I dropped lightly to the ground within.

Once within the walls there was no immediate danger of discovery, yet to remain hiding among the bushes into which I had landed would gain me nothing. Still holding my shortsword, I sped across the wet terrace toward the rear of the building before me, wondering how I could gain an entrance, as all its doors were certain to be either barred or guarded. My eyes fell upon a balcony above me, beside which grew a slender tree. It was the work of but a few minutes till I stood on that deserted little gallery. It led to a dim-lit hallway.

Down this I made a silent advance. In the distance a slender glass-encased beam of light glowed in the niche of an intersecting passage, a somewhat wider hallway from which came the murmur of voices. Here a small circular balcony was mounted by a railing, while at the far end of the passage a stairway led downward. A quick scrutiny showed the hall to be deserted, so on tiptoe I advanced to the railing and looked down into the room below.

IT WAS a good-sized chamber, well lit and well furnished. At the tables in its center sat two men—one the Kamma I had

first seen on my arrival on the Moon of Lost Souls. The other was a tall and much younger man of about my own age, whose well-chiseled features might have been handsome were it not for the too thin lips and close-set eyes. But what was far more noticeable was the lightness of his skin—an outstanding contrast to the blue-black hue of his companion. Plainly there was a strong dash of white blood in him. His jewel-encrusted weapons and trappings flashed and sparkled. This then was Magog, son of Metak.

Seated on a chair in a far corner of the room, gagged and bound and looking at the others with frightened eyes, was he for whom I had been searching—Abel the bird-man.

The Kamma was speaking:

"But what you ask is madness, Worthy One," he was saying. "Stealing is one thing, but to murder a royal captive—and one expected by the Queen at that——"

"Don't be a fool," broke in Magog. "It is neck or nothing now. My father's influence put me in command of one of the ships that collect the ransom and tributes demanded of the various worlds our armies have conquered, but even he would be unable to save me were the Queen to ever learn the truth; that four times during the past year I have landed here and left as many ransoms in your care, then proceeded on to Capara with the report that certain worlds were unable to meet our demands."

"This Princess you speak of?" asked the Kamma.

"Vonna of Penelope," went on the other. "It is her world for one whose ransom we have taken. Twice within the past year I have been sent to the tiny blue star to collect its semi-annual tribute. On both occasions I have brought the treasure to you, then returned and reported the failure of the Penelopians to pay. I expected nothing to arise over it, for Penelope is a tiny little world containing nothing of any great value, and its payments ridiculously small compared to the huge tributes of some of the larger planets. But for some reason my report displeased the Queen, and she ordered one of her fleets to return with me, to release the Vapors of Vengeance on Penelope and destroy it; also for me to bring the Princess of Penelope to her. That means discovery, for the Princess Vonna is certain to tell that the ransoms have been paid."

The Kamma gave a gasp, half rose from his chair, then sat down again.

"I knew it. I knew that we would be found out sooner or later," he sobbed. "But I am not the one to blame. It was you. It was you who——"

Magog's laugh was short and harsh.

"Too late for that. You are in it with me up to the neck, and if discovered I will not go tumbling into the Pit of Blackness alone. Any time mine or any other ransom ship returns to Capara it is officially searched, and its contents taken to the royal treasury. But when your own small flyer lands it is never inspected, for how could one possibly be bringing gold and jewels from the Moon of Lost Souls?

"What if I were to tell that every time you landed for those innocent, over-night visits, your ship contained a king's ransom? That you and I have later met and divided four treasures which rightfully belong to Queen Tara?"

"But this girl—this Princess Vonna?" asked the other. "If we murder her they are bound to suspect us and wonder why. It will only mean discovery."

"Not with me running things," answered Magog, and it was only by straining my ears that I could hear him at all, for continuous thunder volleys were crashing across the heavens, and a furious downpour splashing against the windows. "Luckily a storm has arisen—good. I can say it forced me to land here for the night. I have given orders for the crew to stay in

the barracks with your guards. That means the ship is unguarded at this moment save for the pilot, a stout fellow in my service, and one we can trust. The Princess Vonna is tied in the entrance cabin. Fortune has further favored us by the timely misbehavior of this Tor."

His eyes signalled to the bound Abel. "By the way," he asked, "what did he do, anyhow?"

"He?" said the Kamma absently. "Oh, he was caught by one of the guards sneaking out of the barracks tonight, acting in a suspicious manner, and he refused to tell where he was going. I was questioning him when you arrived. But—but how can he be of any use to us?" demanded the Kamma.

"By relieving us of any suspicion that might arise over the murder of the Princess Vonna," answered Magog. Then as the other looked quizzical:

"Let us take this Tor to the ship with us at once. No one is without, and we shall not be seen. There we can release him and dispatch him, along with the Princess Vonna, then raise the cry that the Tor escaped us and ran to the ship; that he murdered the Princess, then attempted to put off into space; that we arrived in time to prevent his escape, and though too late to save the royal captive, we were at least able to avenge her."

I WAITED to hear no more. The words of Magog made clear his intentions. I now knew the ship was unguarded. Could I rescue Abel and reach it, there might still be a chance for us both. And so, before any of them dreamed of the nearness of my presence, I had vaulted over the low railing, and with drawn shortsword dropped lightly to the floor ten feet below me, and directly before the seated pair.

What a surprise! The Kamma and Abel both knew my identity, of course, but to the startled eyes of Magog I must have appeared as the figment of a dream. There was a moment's silence; then: "Blood of my Ancestors!" gasped the son of Metak. "Who are you and where did you come from?"

I motioned them to remain in their seats, my glittering blade waving from the breast of one to the other.

"Don't move," I told them quietly. "It just so happens that at this minute an Earthman has the upper hand."

With my left arm I made the gesture that brought Abel from his chair and beside me, for though his arms were bound, his legs were free. Then without taking my eyes off the seated pair, I had soon released the bird-man, whose thongs dropped to his feet. This done, I ordered him to disarm both men, then gag and bind the Kamma to his chair. The latter was loud in his protest of this, but a painful jab of my swordpoint quickly silenced him, and a moment later he was but a mute and helpless witness to what was to follow.

I turned to Magog. All this while he had risen and was watching me with a surprised, puzzled expression that was gradually changing to one of fear.

"What do you want?" he whispered as our eyes met. "What are you going to do?"

"Witness the end of a Black Raider," I answered him. "I want to see if the son of Metak can meet death as readily as his sire sentenced my own world to it."

He looked wildly about him. "But I am unarmed!" he cried. "You would not kill a defenseless man!"

"Why not?" I answered grimly. "Surely that's what your own kind have been doing for centuries. Turning those terrible Vapors of Vengeance upon a thousand worlds, and killing untold billions without giving them the slightest chance for their lives. It would be no more than fair were I to run you through where you stand. But I am no Black Raider, nor will

I kill a defenseless man. Here—I give you the chance your own would not give mine," and I tossed his unsheathed longsword to him, the handle of which he deftly caught.

"On guard, Caparian," I warned, and fell into position.

His reply was a quick thrust at my heart which I side-stepped and the next instant, our blades clashed together as they met in a fast exchange of thrusts and parries.

I had no fear of the noise attracting the warriors in the barracks. The great building was scarcely a stone's throw away it is true, but it was a strongly built structure that deadened vibration, and again the wild din of the storm obliterated all else. Our two sole witnesses were the excited Abel, and the bound and gagged Kamma—the eyes of the latter glaring hate and horror—the dark orbs of the bird-man wide and gleaming.

Not that there was any great doubt as to the outcome. From the first it was evident that the duel would be of short duration.

A fast counter-thrust had laid bare the cheekbone of Magog at the first onset, and a moment later he was in a steady retreat—stepping between and around the various pieces of furniture with an accuracy that showed a thorough knowledge of the room, while I pressed ever forward, as I realized the possibility of a chance entrance of some guard.

At length a sudden maneuver backed him into a corner from which there was no escape. That Magog realized the end was near was evident as, wide-eyed and desperate, he frantically sought to parry the thrusts of the dazzling blade before him. His mouth half opened as though to appeal for mercy, but shut again as he realized its futility. That merciless steel whirred ever closer. Then, doomed, crazed with fear, the doors of death opening to claim him, the Black Raider did that which branded him as the lowest of cowards, even among his own.

In desperation he lashed out with a wicked slash that halted me for an instant. Then as the cut was met and parried, his free hand brought up the paralysis-wand from his belt. But before its green rays could be turned upon me, an upward sweep of my blade sent it flying from his hand. The next instant three feet of steel went tearing through his heart.

With a groan half bestial the son of Metak sank lifeless to the floor.

Pausing only to wipe my blade on a hanging I motioned for Abel to follow me. Then in a deathly silence we hurried from the room and out into the raging night, where numerous lightning flashes showed a narrow, stone-flagged walk that led through an open gateway, above which hung a huge alarm gong. The rain-drenched courtyard between us and the ship was deserted, but I now felt that the moments till discovery were rapidly drawing to a close, for already the first evidence of dawn was stealing across the thundering sky. Soon would come the light of day, and then the awakened warriors from the barracks.

The open doorway of the ship was soon before us, and with a nod to the bird-man I crept forward, hearing his faint tread as he followed.

The interior of the huge ship was brilliantly lighted. A narrow passageway stretched through several large rooms to terminate in the exit chamber at its far end. But there was no need for further exploration, for there on a chair, her shapely arms bound behind her, was a lovely young golden-haired girl of my own color that I intuitively knew to be Vonna, the captured Princess of Penelope.

"Shadows moved here and there—dim human faces looked out at them."

Twister

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Ghostly was the village where the newly wedded couple stopped for gasoline, and weird was their experience there

BOB CLAYTON turned his head left and right to relax the tense muscles of his neck. He flexed fingers cramped from gripping the steering-wheel, glanced sidewise at his wife huddled wearily in the car seat beside him. Slowing the small coupé to a standstill, he glanced at his wrist-watch, then ahead at the darkening ribbon of highway.

"I knew we should have stopped at that

last town," he growled irritably. "What was it—Saltersburg? Now it's beginning to drizzle, the windshield wiper has quit on us, and we have only one headlight—miles from nowhere! Well, this honeymoon jaunt was your idea, not mine!"

Switching on the overhead light, he pored over the rumpled road map, scowling. Beside him, his young bride stretched, yawned, and ran a caressive hand over the Scotty in her lap. Being a wise wife, she risked no reply but continued to gaze sleepily at the fireflies lighting the dark fields on either side of the highway.

Clayton frowned as he squinted at the marked route. Tossing the map aside, he trod viciously on the starter and drove on again with a jerk. Myra Clayton, tactfully, pretended not to hear his muttered profanity.

"Thirty miles at least to Evansboro, the next town," her husband lashed out disgustedly. "Myra—darling, I hate the thought of spending our wedding night in a cheap tourist camp." His frown cleared slightly, and he smiled at his wife, reached over to pat the terrier in her lap. "Oh, well," he shrugged, "you take a nap, dear, and I'll just keep driving until we reach a decent hotel."

He sat back with a yawn, eyes fixed on the highway ahead. At the pressure of his foot the coupé leaped forward, spearing the gathering dusk with its single headlight. Myra snuggled closer and rested her head on a tweed shoulder. Humming a popular song in duet, they drove on as night settled softly over the countryside.

The highway was singularly deserted. There was no sound except the purr of the motor and the whisper of tires on wet cement. A fine rain misted the windshield. Vapor rose from the hot pavement, giving everything an eery unreal quality. Bullfrogs croaked dismally from the roadside ditches as though warning them of a nameless peril that followed close behind or lurked just around the next curve. Myra Clayton closed her eyes. . . .

She opened them again with a start, feeling a difference in the motion of the coupé. Blinking at her husband, she saw that he was squinting through the windshield intently at something ahead. An unreasoning apprehension chilled her blood. She pressed closer to the solid figure of the man beside her; found herself shivering, though the night was unpleasantly warm.

"Bob, wh-what is it?" she whispered. "A crack-up?"

But his cheery grin by the dashlight reassured her at once.

"It's a town," he announced, relief in his tone. "Must be Evansboro—though I don't see how it could be, this soon. By the map, it's a good thirty miles from Saltersburg."

The Scotty stirred, sniffed nervously. Myra Clayton sat erect, patting at her hair.

"Good!" she sighed. "I'm so terribly tired of driving, and I know you are, poor darling! Hope we can smuggle MacTavish up to the room—he howls if I leave him alone."

She peered out the car window as the coupé slowed down. Against the dark skyline, darker shapes of houses loomed. But there was no light in any of them, no street lights, no illumination at all. A devil's-fork of lightning, stabbing the sky at intervals, revealed a small "whistle-stop" town of perhaps two thousand population.

"Huh!" Clayton muttered. "They certainly roll up the sidewalks early. It's only ten-thirty, but everybody seems to have gone to bed."

He cruised along at a snail's pace, squinting out through the misted window-glass. Presently the car light picked out a weather-beaten sign, unlighted, hanging close to the roadside. GUESTS, it invited

briefly, and Clayton braked the coupé, trying to make out the dark house beyond. Its vague bulk could be seen but dimly against the sky, Victorian in architecture, set far back from the highway.

Leaping out, head down in the drizzle, he strode up a grass-grown walk and knocked at the door with growing disfavor.

The place was extremely ill-kept. Wind whistled through a broken-out place in the colored glass of the door, and leaves and debris littered the rotting veranda.

NO ONE answered Clayton's first knock. He was about to turn away, when a woman's figure appeared abruptly, coming around from the side porch, her footsteps making no sound, Clayton noticed, as did his own. Lightning picked out her ample form, clad in a dark dress of some kind, and her round white face framed by untidy gray hair. She did not offer any greeting; merely stood there, part of the darkness.

"We'd like a room for the night," Clayton began. "My wife and myself. I noticed your sign—you do take tourists, don't you?"

There was a long silence. The woman simply stood there, regarding him gravely. She turned her head, taking in the parked coupé, then looked slowly back at Clayton.

"No." Her voice startled him with its odd quality: high, vibrant, like the sound of wind blowing through a crack, and as toneless as that of a deaf-mute. "No," she repeated. "I don't take tourists any more. Not any more, no." She peered closer at him, eyes only dark holes in that white moon-face. "You're not—like us, are you?" she asked softly.

Clayton laughed, shook his head. "My Yankee accent, you mean? No, I'm from Chicago. We're just passing through. . . . Well—you say you don't take guests. I wonder if you'd direct me to the best hotel? We've been traveling since daybreak."

The woman continued to regard him silently. Then she shook her head.

"You won't like it at the hotel," she spoke, still in that hollow toneless voice. "No accommodations anywhere in town, if you're—not used to things, like us. We don't take no strangers much here, anyhow."

Clayton stiffened, compressed his lips. "Indeed?" he snapped. "If it's a question of money, of course I intended paying in advance."

Wind stirred his hair, chilly with blown rain. Somewhere a shutter creaked and banged against the house. At the sound of it, the woman shivered and pressed against the wall.

"Pay in advance?" she echoed dully. "Oh—that! We don't worry about that around here any more." She laughed, a hollow mirthless sound. "You can stay here if you like, sure. But I'd drive on to the next town if I was you."

She stopped short, cringing like a whipped animal as another gust of wind shook the eaves. Sidling over to the porch rail, she peered anxiously up at the sky, clinging to a rotting pillar as if for support.

"Yes, yes!" she mumbled. "You'd better drive on, pretty fast! The wind is rising. Toward dawn it'll be roaring like a freight train. . . . Hear it? Hear it roaring in the distance?"

Clayton frowned, looking up at a forked display of lightning. "The wind?" he echoed, and laughed. "You've got keener ears than I have. All I can hear is rain on the roof."

The woman shook her head gravely. "You can hear it," she whispered dully, "if you really listen. You and your wife better be driving on before it's too late."

Clayton eyed her, quizzical. He shrugged, grinned. "Well—good night,

then. Sorry to have disturbed you so late. I suppose we'll have to drive on anyway, if the accommodations here are so poor." He frowned at the sky, clearing now toward the west. "You really think there's a wind storm coming up? Those clouds don't look so very——"

The woman turned on him swiftly, shaking a gnarled finger. "You can't tell!" she whispered sharply. "That's just it! You can't ever tell what wind is liable to do. . . . I must close the shutters," her voice lowered to a mumble, and she scuttled around the side porch again. "Close the shutters, and put the garden chairs inside. . . ."

She was gone. Clayton took a step after her, then grinned, shrugged, and returned to his sleepy wife in the coupé.

"No dice, darling," he reported ruefully. "This Evansboro seems to be the jumping-off place. The old lady here advised me to drive on. Says there's a bad wind storm coming up—and us with no windshield wiper and only one headlamp! Better get that fixed if there's an all-night service station."

His wife sighed. "Well—whatever you say. . . . Oh, do sit still, MacTavish!"

The dog was pressing close to her now, shivering and whining nervously. All at once he lifted his muzzle and gave vent to a mournful howl. Clayton and his wife laughed, trying to quiet him.

"My sentiments exactly, pup!" Myra laughed wearily. "Well—better get some gas, too, darling. Looks like we're doomed to drive all night!"

THEY inched along between dark canyons of buildings half seen whenever the lightning flared. But the streets, on closer inspection, were not so deserted as they first appeared. Shadows moved here and there—dim human shapes. Faces looked out at them from the storefronts.

"Hmm," Clayton commented, "a few folks are still up and about after all, though I don't see how they find their way around. Confound these dark streets! Guess something must have happened to the electric current. Probably cut it off as a storm warning."

He leaned out the window, scanning the dark storefronts until at last the white shape of a filling-station slid into the radius of car light. Turning in, he pulled up beside a rusty gas pump, sounding his horn. Its raucous blare shattered the silence into a thousand eery echoes, and abruptly, a lean sallow-faced youth appeared out of the darkness.

"Five gallons of twenty-cent gas," Clayton ordered. "And fix that headlight, will you?"

The man stared at him without speech, made no move to obey.

Clayton scowled at him. "Hurry up!" he snapped. "Five gallons."

The filling-station attendant blinked at him, nodded dully, and moved to the rear of the car. Something clanked and Clayton thought he could hear liquid gushing into the gas tank. Presently the lanky youth came around to the front again, shielding his eyes from the headlight's glare.

He stood there stupidly for a moment, poking at the lamp. Then:

"Mister, you got a short—I don't think I could fix it." His voice, like that of the old woman, was high, tremulous, and devoid of tone.

A gust of wind whistled through the car just then, rustling the road map in Clayton's hand. The filling-station attendant shuddered as it did so, staring up at the sky.

The rain had stopped, and a few stars were peeping out between the thinning clouds. But there was terror and apprehension on the youth's sallow face as he scanned the northwest horizon. His mouth jerked, Clayton saw, and his dull

eyes were like the eyes of a drowning horse.

"Mister," he whispered, "you better get going! There's a twister blowing up. Hear it roaring through Logan's Pass? One minute you don't suspect a thing—and the next minute, it's on you! Just sweeps everything flat, and then it's gone again. . . . Hear it? Listen! It's coming!"

Clayton frowned, listening intently. There *was* a roaring sound in the distance, but it was accompanied by the wail of a train whistle. The night sky was clearing rapidly, and the remaining wispy clouds moved not at all as though wind-driven.

But Myra, straining her ears, was growing nervous. Animals, she recalled, are sensitive to weather-signs, and the dog in her lap was shivering violently. It bared its teeth at the service man in a way most unusual to its friendly disposition. Suddenly it gave vent to another howl, and dived for cover under their feet.

Bob Clayton fumbled for his billfold rather hurriedly, and extracted a dollar; held it out. The youth took it, hardly glancing at him, cavernous eyes fixed on the horizon. His face in the headlight's glow was pasty-white and distorted with terror, blind animal-terror that made Clayton's flesh crawl.

"Coming through Logan's Pass!" the youth mumbled. "It's headed this way; we're right in the path of it. . . . Mister, you better drive like the devil! Maybe you can outrun it—and maybe not."

Myra clutched at her husband's arm, trembling.

"Bob!" she whimpered. "This is tornado country! I—I'm scared! Hadn't we better leave the car and hunt a cyclone cellar?"

Clayton shook his head, stamped on the starter. "No, no, darling—we'd better run for it! Didn't you hear what this fellow said? This cursed town is directly in the path of a twister coming through Logan's Pass. . . . But what are you folks going to do?" he demanded, facing the terrified youth again. "Have you got cyclone cellars? Why don't you just evacuate the town?"

The thin-faced attendant stared at him dazedly, like a child in the path of an oncoming truck. "We can't do that—this is our home," he said dully. "And running away won't help, anyhow. A twister moves too fast. If it—if it wants you, it gets you, and that's all there is to it. There's no escape—no escape for anybody."

Clayton snorted. Under his hand, the gears clashed and the coupé swung into the highway again. Sweat beaded his forehead, but he smiled reassurance at his young bride.

"Don't worry, darling," he laughed. "We'll be miles away before any wind storm blows up around here. Even if—if it catches us, we can drive the car into a deep ditch and have perfect protection."

Stepping hard on the gas, he drove off with a haste that belied his calm exterior. The shapes of buildings straggled out, then merged swiftly into treetops as they left the little town behind.

CLAYTON crouched over the steering-wheel, gas feed jammed to the floor. The coupé lunged, skidded, rocked crazily, held to the road only by the skill of its driver.

Myra Clayton huddled in her seat corner, wide-eyed and hugging the terrier in her arms. Now and then she glanced fearfully at the sky, almost clear now and studded with stars. Her ears ached from listening for an ominous roaring above the purr of the engine. But no such terrifying sound broke the peaceful stillness of the countryside.

Her husband was listening for it, too, neck muscles tense with apprehension. De-

struction, doom, from out of the sky! Flattening everything in its path. If they could not outrun it. . . .

The coupé sputtered without warning. Clayton pulled at the choke, stared at the gas gage in horror. It measured "Empty." With a second cough the car jerked to a halt, and the engine died.

"Out of gas!" Clayton exploded. "Why, we can't be! I just got five gallons back there in Evansboro. Oh, Lord!" he groaned. "Miles from nowhere, a tornado coming—and this had to happen! Darling, we'll have to push it into that ditch, and—just pray."

He leaped out, cursing. Myra Clayton, clinging to the Scotty, climbed out after him.

"Oh, Bob," she whimpered, "what are we going to—*oh!*"

She screamed suddenly, flinging herself into her husband's arms as, unheralded, a tall gaunt figure looked out of the darkness, blinding them with a powerful flashlight.

Clayton's blood froze. He cursed himself for leaving his gun in the glove compartment; wondered wildly if he dared make a dive for it, when:

"Howdy, folks," the man with the torch greeted pleasantly, in the mountain twang of the area. "Y'all know you only got one light?"

Clayton breathed out in a gusty laugh of relief as the man came closer, revealing the glint of a deputy sheriff's badge on his overall front.

"Thank heavens!" he burst out. "Listen, sheriff—you've got to help us get away from here! There's a twister headed this way! They just told us about it when we drove through Evansboro."

The lawman leaned against the car deliberately, unshaved face calm and humorous in the reflected light.

"Young feller," he drawled, "I got my orders to run in every drunk driver I come acrost. I smell liquor on your breath—and you're sure talking wild enough. Evansboro is fourteen mile on up the road from here. And if there'd been any storm warnin' in this county, I'd a-been the first to hear of it."

Clayton's jaw dropped, then shut with a snap.

"Now, see here," he clipped out "I had one drink—yes, one!—right after dinner in Silver City four hours ago. As for the twister, two people in Evansboro—or whatever town we just came through—warned us it was coming through Logan's Pass."

The sheriff chuckled, jerking a thumb at the stars. "Out o' that clear sky?" He snorted. "Young feller, the last bad wind we had through here was in '34. And February and March is the months for 'em, not July. If you ain't drunk, you're crazy—because the last town you strike before you get to Evansboro on this highway is Saltersburg, twenty-odd mile back where you come from."

Myra moved close to her husband, mouth open in indignation.

"That's ridiculous!" she exploded. "We stopped in Saltersburg for cigarettes almost an hour ago. Don't you stand there and try to tell us we didn't come through another little town just a few miles back! I——"

The deputy eyed her and spat carefully. He looked over his glasses at Clayton, then rather sadly shook his head.

"I got to lock you both up," he announced apologetically. "The way you was hellin' . . . pardon, Ma'm . . . comin' down the highway! Then you stop right sudden and start gabbin' about a twister and a town that don't exist. Y'all ain't in no fit state for night-drivin', Ma'm, for a fact."

Clayton was bristling now. Weariness and the harrowing events just past had frayed his temper to the snapping-point.

He took a step forward, fist clenched. But his wife caught his arm.

"Wait, dear," she said evenly. "This gentleman seems to doubt our word, but I'm sure we can convince him. Officer, if you'll let us have some gas, we'll be glad to drive you back and show you the town we went through. But—tomorrow, please, after the tornado strikes. I have no desire to be blown through a tree tonight—even if we were drunk, which we're not."

The deputy stood erect again, sweeping off his greasy hat with some embarrassment. Clayton grinned. The fellow was evidently a moron of the lowest order, and Myra was handling him the only way possible. Now he gave her an apologetic bob of contrition.

"Sorry, Ma'm; you can't alluz tell, you know." He coughed. "As to the gas, I'll sell you some, right enough; there's a can up at the house. But—honest, there ain't no town between Saltersburg and Evansboro. Not even a tourist camp. You look on your road map whilst I go after your gas."

HE TURNED and vanished into the night again. Clayton glowered after him, then deliberately pulled a stack of road maps from the glove compartment. There was among them, he recalled, a special state map. Almost every ant-hill along the highway was marked on it, and a town as big as the one they had just left would surely be included.

But, frowning over the local map a moment later, he shook his head, puzzled and chagrined. There was no sign of a town marked along the route between the two cities.

"This beats me," he murmured, then scanned the sky apprehensively. "No wind storm yet. They couldn't have been kidding us, could they? No, no, two separate people—and they both looked terrified, saying they could hear the wind roaring in the distance. But look at that sky; there's certainly no sign of a twister around here."

A few minutes later, when the mountain sheriff had filled their tank with gas. Clayton faced him sheepishly.

"Look," he said. "I paid a dollar for gas at that town back there; I'll prove it to you if you'll ride back with us. It can't have been more than five miles. Besides, I have a few words to say to that filling-station attendant. They'll gyp you a gallon or two sometimes if you don't watch—but we wouldn't have given out of gas if he'd put in any at all! Probably some vagrant pulling a fast one on me with a locked pump." He grinned. "Maybe you'll make your arrest tonight after all, Sheriff."

The deputy spat again, and rested one foot on the running-board.

"Won't tomorrow do?" he drawled. "Your wife here looks mighty sleepy; and we got a extry room. You can sleep there tonight, and we'll drive back and nab your gas-chiseling feller right after breakfast."

Clayton smiled, and nodded at once.

"Sounds wonderful," he laughed. "I'm so tired, I don't know my own name, and my wife is worn out, I know. Mind our having the pup with us?"

"Nope, not a bit," their benefactor assured them. "House is up the hill a piece; I'll show you. But say, young feller; that stuff about a twister coming through Logan's Pass—why, who'd a-told you that? Must have been an old-timer funnin' with you. Since the Government blasted for water-power ten years ago, one side of the Pass has been leveled out flat. Don't hardly anybody remember it was ever there."

He climbed into the car, shaking his head, and pointed the way up a narrow by-road off the highway, at the end of which a white clapboard farmhouse perched on the hilltop.

After breakfast next morning they piled into the coupé again and headed back down the highway. The fresh green of the vegetation looked innocent and peaceful. A clear blue sky brightened as the sun rose, cloudless and serene after the rain.

"Twister!" the sheriff snorted, grinning in good-natured derision at Clayton and his wife as they rolled along. "Somebody sure is a practical joker in this town of yours, selling you fake gas and what-all!"

Clayton said nothing, but his eyes met those of his wife curiously. Half the night they had lain awake, puzzling about the town that was not on any road map and the wind storm that had not materialized.

WATCHING the milometer, Clayton looked ahead, and suddenly pointed in triumph.

"There! Here's our town! I knew we couldn't have imagined——" He broke off, staring, a little pulse beginning to throb at his temple.

"Good Lord!" he breathed. "I can't believe it!"

For the rows of buildings along the highway as he slowed down could hardly be called buildings at all. Crumbling shells of moss-covered brick loomed against the sky, desolate and inhabited only by nesting birds. The shattered hulks of old houses, sometimes no more than one rotting wall or a vine-hidden chimney, reared from foundations overgrown with grass and weeds.

In front of one swung a battered sign Clayton remembered. GUESTS, it read—but the house beyond had no top story. It was torn off as if by the hand of an angry giant. No one could have lived inside—no one but kindred of the spider and the bat. There was no sign of an old woman with a white round face, scraggly gray hair and terror-dilated eyes. Dust lay undisturbed on the rotting porch, save where a man's footprints had mounted the steps and come down again.

"That's"—Clayton's voice was strangled, his face blank with unbelief—"that's where I—it can't be!"

His dazed eyes swept the one-street town where not a house, not a building stood which was not smashed beyond reasonable repair. The giant's-hand had swept across the entire village, battering, smashing, destroying as if in one brutal gesture.

Parts of other buildings lay in front yards. One small outhouse hung half in, half out of a gaping hole in the wall of a crumbling Colonial mansion. A great oak, jerked out of the earth like a blade of grass, lay through the center of a crushed bungalow.

The sheriff's guffaw startled Clayton from his trance.

"Oh! This is your town, eh? Why, it's been deserted for years, ever since the twister in '22."

"*Twister?*" Clayton swallowed with a dry mouth, and felt his wife's cold hand slide shakily into his own. "Did—did you say——?"

"Sure!" The deputy chortled. "But it wasn't last night, young feller—it was seventeen year ago! Worst we ever had, I recollect. Wiped out near about everybody in the town here. The rest moved away, they couldn't afford to rebuild, and there wasn't much to hold 'em here, anyhow. Why, I just never thought about this place when y'all spoke about stopping at a town nearer than Evansboro! Nobody stops here, not even hoboes. Some dang-fool story about it being haunted. . . ."

Myra Clayton edged closer to her husband in the car seat, wide-eyed and silent. The dog in her lap whined softly.

"It's natural folks'd cook up some such tale," the sheriff was rambling on cheerfully. "When the twister struck here, nobody had received any storm warnin', be-

cause the weather bureau didn't dream it'd be such a bad one. Freak wind in July, it was. Nobody was prepared for it, so of course hundreds was killed. Some of the unidentified bodies was buried on the spot. Too tore-up to ship . . . July the 12, 1922, that was," he drawled, then grunted. "Say, that was exactly seventeen years ago yestiddy! Funny coincidence. . . ."

But Bob Clayton was not listening. He had turned the coupé and was cruising back down the highway to where a white stucco filling-station squatted forlornly between the wreckage of two stores. Slowly he braked the car and climbed out. Slowly, not daring to look at his wife, he walked up the drive-in and paused beside a rusty gas pump—empty and hoseless by daylight. He knew, somehow, what he would find there. Bending down, he picked it up with an unsteady hand. . . .

A dollar bill. The dollar bill he had laid in the palm of a pale youth with a deathless terror in his hollow eyes: terror beyond the peace of the grave, terror that had let neither him, nor hundreds of others in that lost town, rest since a yellowish cloud had roared down upon them from the sky almost a score of years before. Waiting, all of them, in a terrible bondage of dread, for the twister to strike again.

Realization

By HARRY WARNER, JR.

I had been told that I should shun the place,
By fishermen of that bleak wind-swept coast.
There had been whispers of some unknown ghost—
And something worse, that none dare even face.

Laughingly, I only mocked their fears;
Called them old maids who feared the black of night.
They signed the cross and went. I came in sight
Of this chalet that wore the dust of years.

But soon I flew in terror from the site
That I had thought but legend-filled before.
The place was dank; shades of eternal night
Hung o'er: and there within the door
Were signs I knew: no mirrors; and there lay
Upon the stairs (too far below) dank clay.

Portrait of a Bride

By EARLE PEIRCE, Jr.

An utterly strange tale of a painter who fell in love with a make-believe wife, or so his friends thought—but did he merely imagine her, after all?

WITH a hollow rattle in its exhaust the ancient bus started down the road and left me standing in the darkness. It was a warm spring evening, and the rain of a few hours before had made perfume in the air as it filtered through the trees. I inhaled the fragrance hungrily. It was like coming home again.

The shabby bus terminal was closed for the night; but a bench stood outside the door beneath an eave, and I sat down to smoke my pipe while awaiting Richman's arrival. It would be a few minutes before he came. Oddly enough, the old Ford bus had been ahead of time.

After the lapse of a year I was keen to see Richman again. We had been together so much in the old days that I looked upon him as a brother; at times an older, wiser brother, and at other times a much younger one who needed looking after. And now he was married.

I couldn't quite adapt myself to the realization that he had a wife. Perhaps I was jealous of her, but God knows he needed a capable woman to look after him. Artists and scientists are alike in that respect.

But it was love and not a desire for domestic orderliness which had finally made a married man of him. After all his years of celibate scorn he had at last fallen, hard. She must be quite a woman.

Of course I couldn't rely completely upon the descriptions of her in his letters. Maudlin devotion there. The man was blind; he could see nothing but the shining side of her. However, the opposite side is for the best man to see, and to keep his counsel about. I suspected that Elizabeth must mother him frightfully.

To end these reflections a car drove up the road and stopped beside the terminal. A man climbed out. It was Stephan, whom I had not seen since Richman left New York a year ago. As he came under the illumination of a street lamp I saw that he hadn't changed a hair; servants rarely do.

"Welcome to Vermont again, sir," he greeted as we shook hands. "Mr. Richman will be delighted that you are here."

"He's expecting me tonight?"

"Oh yes, sir! He requested me to come to the depot. He has a slight catarrh. The doctor keeps him indoors."

Stephan carried my bag to the car. It was the same antiquated Buick, but miraculously clean. I saw Elizabeth's Victorian hand in that.

"You feel the difference already, sir?" Stephan was buoyant with enthusiasm as we climbed into the car. "It's something in the air. You can't help but notice it —a sort of rarefied, invigorating quality. It's made a new man of Mr. Richman, sir."

"He's well, then — other than the catarrh?"

Through the corners of my eyes I perceived the negative shake of Stephan's head.

"At first I saw only a vague outline of a woman's body, with the moon shining through it."

"Not exactly well, as you would say, sir. His lungs are still a bit crusty, and the doctor can't give him much of a margin on that account. But he's happy! He's working and he's happy. I never expected to see him like this again."

This was good news, but not unexpected. Richman's many letters spoke well of his new lease on life. I relaxed in the automobile seat with a feeling of complacency.

"I take it," I murmured, "that married life is good to him."

There was a short silence which, at that time, I did not construe as ominous. Indifferent to it, I went on:

"After all those years we nearly lost hope of his ever marrying, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir, we nearly did."

Again there was a brief silence as the car rolled smoothly over the dirt highway. I became aware of a slight tension between us.

"Fond of your new mistress, aren't you, Stephan?" I inquired.

FOR the moment Stephan did not answer me. He seemed deliberately preoccupied with his driving. I repeated my question.

With a grim cast to his face, Stephan let up on the accelerator and steered the car to one side of the road. He pulled

back the brake and brought the machine to a jarring stop.

"I've got to tell you, sir," he cried suddenly. "It—it's about Mrs. Richman. She is a myth."

"A myth?" I reiterated. "What do you mean?"

Stephan ran a hand distraughtly through his graying hair. His lips twisted in an attempt to find words.

"I realize what a shock it must be to you, sir. And I sincerely wish that I had written you about it before you came up here. Mrs. Richman doesn't exist except in his imagination. It's an obsession, the doctor says. He calls it the fixation of an idea in his conscious mind."

I stared at him incredulously.

"Do you mean to tell me that his wife is not real—that she's imaginary?"

"Yes, sir. She's imaginary. Ever since the beginning she has been a part of his mind. It's uncanny, but he believes in her reality as—as a saint believes in Christ. It frightens me at times. I fear he might suddenly awaken and find her only a dream. It would kill him, sir."

For a moment I was speechless.

"Let me get this straight, Stephan. You mean to tell me that Richman's wife does not exist in reality? There is no such person as Elizabeth?"

I stopped. Belatedly I realized that Richman had never told me his wife's maiden name.

Stephan seemed to understand my hesitation. He spoke as one at a high requiem.

"I wish I had written to you, sir. It would have prevented a great deal of embarrassment. I really don't know what I can say now."

I shook my hand to stop his abject chatter. There was no need for him to explain further. I saw it clearly now: Richman, the idealist—the artist in search of beauty. . . . His mind rebelled against harsh realities. His sensitive soul did the rest. To any psychiatrist it was an old story. But Elizabeth a myth!

"I tried to orient him several months ago," Stephan went on, "but the idea had already taken possession of him. Now it is too late. The doctor says he is hopelessly insane."

It was a brutal word even in Stephan's quiet voice, and I winced at it.

"Please, sir! He isn't in any discomfort. On the contrary, he seems sublimely happy, and his work is better than ever before. He is doing her portrait in oils. A work of genius, even though it is inspired by insanity. The two are not remote, you know."

"Her portrait? As he sees her?"

"A beautiful painting, sir. You will see it for yourself."

"But how do you deal with him?" I demanded. "With Elizabeth a——"

"It's quite simple, sir. One might call it a sort of game we play. The madam has a room of her own next to his. I never go in there, except to take a meal tray to the door. He does all the rest—sweeps it, sir, and does the cleaning, and brings down her dishes. He is worried because she doesn't touch any of the food, but not even that can shake his faith in her reality. At night they—seem to slip out into the garden together."

"Good God!" I muttered. "How long has this been going on, Stephan?"

"For three months, sir, ever since the marriage."

"Marriage! D'you mean to tell me he actually had a ceremony?"

"The Reverend Mr. Blanding himself performed it, sir. You see, we are all his friends, and anything we can do to make him happy—even though it be in this mad dream of his—we shall do it to the end. It's little enough for the man who's been so kind to us."

With defensive deliberation Stephan released the brake and started the car ahead.

THE drive to the house was too brief for my peace of mind. I wanted some time in which to think this over. The suddenness of Stephan's revelation shattered my fondest visions, and I sat there with the wreck of them in my hands.

The ancestral home of the Richmans came out of the night to meet us. Huge frame windows spilled rectangles of light out onto the drive. The black outline of the house stood soberly against the blue-black sky with all the durability of a mountain.

Stephan stopped the car to let me out before he drove on to the garage.

"Try to act normally, sir," he cautioned. "And speak to her once in a while. He will imagine that he hears her respond."

Stephan drove off before I could question him on this point, and for a moment —as the car vanished around the corner— I felt a sting of panic. I was tempted to await his return before venturing into the house; then I realized that he would enter by the back way. I knocked on the door.

Richman himself answered the summons. He was less emaciated, although still thin and consumptive-looking. I was impressed by the singular brightness of his eyes.

"Welcome, John!" He pumped my arm vigorously. "By all the gods, you're welcome! Sorry I didn't get down to the depot, but Doc's been dosing me with all kinds of nostrums. How've you been? You're looking fit."

He was feverishly cordial, and I knew that his cordiality was sincere. We went into a shabby old living-room for drinks.

"Elizabeth's dressing," he said. "Dinner in a few moments. She's dined already, but I think she'll come down. She doesn't take cocktails, so it's you and me on these." He lifted a glass to his lips. "We'll drink to her."

The initial surprise of Stephan's confession had not worn off. I studied Richman shamelessly as I sipped the martini. It was shocking to think of him as mad—shocking and a little horrible.

"You will adore her," he went on. "Everyone does. A woman as rare as genius. Did I tell you how we met? I was walking in the garden at midnight, and there she stood, all radiant and storybookish in the moonlight. She'd been out walking too, and had lost her way. . . . She never went back, John. I often think that some kind of fate sent her to me. I dreamed of her, you know, long before she came. . . ."

Richman looked recklessly handsome as he spoke. His skin was pale and taut across his facial bones, but the eyes imparted to him a vitality I have seldom seen in any man. His jet-black hair was heedlessly mussed; a ringlet of it dangled over his forehead.

"D'you remember how we used to philosophize on women, John? I the Victorian, you the cynic. How we were to put women in their places. Remember how I was to paint nothing but pastorals? And you to write nothing but Cabellian novels? Oh those years! I often tell Elizabeth about them. We spend hours in reminiscence. It's odd how she seems to know all that history that you and I lived together. It's telepathy, I'm certain. We intrude on each other's most private musings as if we shared a single mind. Poetic, eh?" He laughed shortly, and, I thought, in slight embarrassment.

He swept a hand through his hair and dropped into a chair, but immediately he rose and began to pace back and forth.

"Can you name any celibates in history who have reached creative genius?" he demanded suddenly. "Your monastic saints, perhaps, and Spinoza. Yet women stood behind these men—women of dreams and revery, women like visions leading them onward. . . ."

He walked to a table and filled his glass.

Another ringlet of hair fell over his brow. I used to determine his mood by these ringlets. In moments of intense passion, a condition generally provoked by his failure to paint exactly what he saw, his forehead was completely blackened by dishevelled hair. His brow was rarely bare.

As I watched him I felt myself to be a detached, an almost clinical observer. Stephan's word *insanity* was responsible for that. I would never have considered it otherwise, never have erected that inviolate barrier between him and me.

He put down his glass and turned toward the door. "Here she comes," he said. "She's always on time."

He walked to the entrance and vanished. A moment later he returned, frowning, sweeping the hair from his eyes.

"I must have been imagining things," he muttered. "Her tread is so light that sometimes I confuse it with the tapping of trees on the roof."

He picked up his glass.

"I remember that when I first saw her I couldn't be certain whether she was there or not. At first I saw only a vague outline of a woman's body, with the moon shining through it from behind. Then gradually a mist seemed to collect and fill in the outline. It grew denser, and suddenly—there she was! A peculiar illusion, due probably to my overwrought mind. I'd been in an absolute hell of despondency just before I decided on that turn in the garden. Fortunate decision!"

His eyes met mine directly as he smiled at me over the top of the glass.

SO FAR I had avoided his eyes out of a fear of embarrassment, but now I saw that my fears were groundless. Richman's eyes were so frank and sincere that I had a momentary impression that there was no subterfuge between us. I smiled back at him.

Unexpectedly he turned again toward the entrance. His brows lifted in surprise.

"Beth!" he cried. "I didn't hear you come down."

Considering the extra weight I seemed to have acquired in the space of those few seconds, I climbed to my feet with commendable alacrity. I was at a complete loss for anything to do; nevertheless I turned expectantly toward the door and waited. Richman, having crossed the room, stood with his back toward me and his arms lifted curiously in the air. His fingers were clasped, as if about a pair of shoulders.

Richman gave me no time in which to adjust myself to this situation. He turned on his heel, dropped one hand to his side but retained the other in its same position, as if holding a person's arm, and accosted me with complete disregard of my plight.

"This is she, John. Beth, you've heard me speak of John Kenyon."

It was a frightful moment. The room fell into an abrupt silence. None of us moved. Then I realized that my eyes were affixed, not upon this imaginary woman, but upon Richman himself. Even to a madman this was unexplainable conduct! I averted my eyes jerkily and made a grotesque bow.

"I—I'm happy to meet you," I stammered.

That silence fell again. Richman was immobile. He stood staring at me, his face strangely set.

Stephan appeared behind him, too quietly to have not been listening.

"Dinner is ready, sir," he announced. His eyes shifted from me to Richman, whose back faced him. "Good evening, madam," he said clearly.

Richman closed his eyes and opened them as if to break a trance. He turned, brushing back his hair.

"Very well, Stephan. Thank you."

I took advantage of this intrusion to overcome my inertia. Primarily, I cracked

the nervous rigidity which had settled upon me and managed to throw my mind into neutral gear, as it were, to permit a relaxation of the muscles in my face. I broadened my wan smile by deliberately pulling back my lips. Even so, I could not trust myself to address a non-existing woman. I spoke to Richman instead.

"An ideal servant, Stephan. Men like that are rare today. You're lucky."

"Yes, we are," said Richman abstractedly. "Very lucky.—Hungry, Beth? Oh! You've dined already, of course. But come along anyway; we want your company."

For the next few minutes, fortunately, Richman broke into one of his long monologs which prevented a silence that might have been unendurable. We seated ourselves about the table, he at one end, I in the middle at his left, and an empty space, with a vacant chair drawn to it, at the opposite end.

"We have a lot to talk about," he continued, his eyes at rest upon the empty chair. "You'll see, Beth, that all I've told you is true. Those days! They fill me with disconsolate pity!"

Stephan entered with a tureen of soup. He went directly to the vacant space, where he paused for a moment before serving me and then Richman.

IT WAS the most unpleasant half-hour I have ever lived through. Richman lapsed into a brooding silence. Stephan came and went, hesitating each time he passed *her* place as if to make an obeisance. The food, to me, was tasteless. The wine was like water.

No longer did Richman gaze at his "Beth." He was sunk in introspection. It was an old mood with him; one which I knew too well. The silence persisted until coffee took us back into the living-room.

Stephan caught my eye as he deposited the tray, but I was unable to decipher his expression. He seemed to be warning me of something. But before I could follow him from the room Richman pinned me to my chair with a cup and saucer.

There were only two cups; we each had one. I surmised that "Beth" forwent coffee as she did cocktails.

The silence became unbearable. I set my cup aside and leaned forward, gripping my knees.

"You — you are native to Vermont, aren't you Mrs. Richman?" I inquired.

Richman's head jerked up.

"*Mrs.* Richman! What's the matter with you, John? Beth went upstairs two minutes ago!"

2

IT WAS a three-story house. Richman had torn away part of the roof and replaced it with a skylight facing the east. As we climbed the attic stairs I detected the characteristic odor of resin and oils.

He turned on the light. At once I saw the portrait of Elizabeth.

Stephan was right; this was Richman's most inspired work. She was a tall woman, with deeply tanned skin, and a wholesome fullness to her face. Her eyes and hair were as black as Richman's own. She wore a billowing white tea-gown that rose high on her chest and puffed at the shoulders. There was a faint smile on her lips —a child's smile. The whole impression was that of a child: the simple gown, the guileless dark eyes, the faintly bluish handkerchief that floated from her fingertips. . . .

"It's my best work," Richman said, "but it's inadequate. It's only a caricature of what she's truly like."

"There's a spirit to it," I told him.

Richman made a deprecating motion.

"A man can't do it as he wants. No man can. I'll destroy this before I'm through."

"Don't do that."

"I shall! I shall! How futile it is even to try!"

These were odd words.

"They say our minds are mirrors reflecting nature. That's all I want—to reflect her perfection. But some place the image is distorted. Some flaw——"

He walked closer to the portrait. Standing there, he studied his work with an air of dejection.

"You can't improve on the original," I pointed out matter-of-factly. "This is a duplication, not a reflection. I mean, it's not as if your canvas were a mirror."

"You always say that," he cried. "As long as I've known you, you've used that same trite simile. A mirror reflects. The mind does more than that; the mind creates, interprets. . . . There is creative art as there is creative literature. Fundamentally, all true art is creative."

"That depends on your definition of the word *creation,*" I said. "In sculpture you can only change form. In music it's composition. In art—painting—it's part shape and part color. True creation, to my mind, is impossible, since all things have already been created. You can only duplicate."

Richman whirled on me, his hair swishing across his eyes.

"D'you think I'll argue this with you! Come along. Let's go downstairs!"

HE GAVE me a room in the back of the house. Stephan had laid out my things; he said good-night to me and left. I got into bed, thinking that Richman deserved less of my pity and more of my material aid. But how could I aid him? My mere presence here seemed to be a source of irritation.

The sound of painful coughing awakened me shortly after eleven o'clock. Richman was in the garden below, hatless, without his coat. I was tempted to call him from my window, but I decided to risk no chance that he would evade me. Donning my robe and slippers I went down to the garden.

He was sitting alone on a stone bench when I tiptoed from the porch. Something about his attitude forbade me to approach any farther. He was as if listening to a voice from beside him.

I listened too, but heard nothing save the occasional rain-drops that slithered earthward through the trees. Unexpectedly Richman spoke.

"If we leave in April we can be there in time for the festival. You'll adore the folk dances, Beth. . . ."

He was interrupted by a coughing spell that seized and shook him brutally. Alarmed by the rawness of his voice I started toward him. I took three steps; a voice hailed me in a shrill whisper.

"Mr. Kenyon, sir!"

A shadow detached itself from a clump of shrubs. Stephan's face appeared, framed beneath derby and muffler.

"Please, sir, let him be," he begged. "No good can come of stopping him. And he suffers intolerably when these moments are intruded upon."

"But that cough! This night air!"

"I know, sir. It aggravates his lungs; it hastens the end. But he lives for these nights. He spends hours here, planning the future, building air-castles. I know, sir. I never let him out of my sight."

"Do you want him to die?" I demanded.

"His death would pain me more than anyone. But since he must die soon I want his last weeks to be happy ones. Just listen to him, sir. Have you ever seen him happier?"

I looked at Richman. I saw a shivering man, a sick man, a man frenziedly chattering to himself.

"It's rather horrible," I grunted.

"Is madness ever without its horror? But is love ever without its beauty? All

his life he has been a lonely and unhappy man. Now his life draws to its finish, and for the first time he knows happiness. There is something—something rather beautiful about it."

"Rot!" I said. "He can commune with Elizabeth indoors as well as out. Come along! We'll get him back into the house."

RICHMAN overheard these words, but whether he understood their meaning or not I never knew. He rose and searched the garden with his eyes until he saw us. His lean face, etched in shadows, was a mask of pain. He blinked rapidly several times. Suddenly he turned and walked swiftly toward the side door of the house. Halfway he stopped and turned around. Again he blinked. He started to come back, hesitated uncertainly, then turned and proceeded into the house.

"What do you make of that?" I asked. "He left her sitting there. That is—well, I imagine she was there! Damn it, Stephan. This is fantastic!"

"That's because you're burdened with preconceived images of her," said the servant. "Had you, as I did, watched the gradual growth of her in his mind you would not find it fantastic. I think you'd find it beautiful."

I shook my head.

"Perhaps," I said dryly. "But this is no time for such speculation. We must safeguard his health, not conspire in these adolescent fantasies. They should have been stopped months ago. Along to the house, Stephan. We'll give him a rubdown and pack him in bed where he belongs."

Stephan followed me silently into the house. We found Richman sitting in his room in the darkness. He coughed raggedly as I turned on the light.

"It's after midnight," I said. "Hadn't you better get to bed? We'll give you a massage. You'll sleep better for it."

He shook his head as if it were too much of an effort to speak. He looked utterly exhausted.

"Come, come, Richman! You're tired. You need a good rest. Let me help you out of those damp things."

He looked up into my eyes.

"Have you seen Beth?" he asked. "We were talking a while ago. Now I can't find her."

"She's in her room asleep," I said shortly. "Just where you belong."

I slipped my hand under his arm and pulled him gently.

"Stephan," I summoned, "take his other arm."

Richman came up easily, but he would not move toward the bed. It was all Stephan and I could do to keep him from walking to the door leading to the empty room where "Beth" was supposed to be lying.

"I must see Beth," he insisted.

"Easy, Richman. Beth's asleep. You can't see her tonight. You must get some rest."

A coughing spell attacked him and he slumped into my arms. Stephan and I took advantage of this to drag him to his bed. We stripped him and clad him in his woolen pajamas.

"I'll sit with him a while," said Stephan. "You'd better get some rest yourself, Mr. Kenyon. You've had a long day."

"Do you think he'll be all right? I'd hate to go to bed if anything were—to happen."

Stephan tucked the blankets about Richman's throat. The coughing had subsided.

"I'll read to him, sir," whispered the servant. "It's an unfailing soporific with him."

There was a slight evidence of resentment in Stephan's voice. Obviously he held me responsible for Richman's present agitation.

I gripped the lower bedpost.

"Call me if anything happens. I——"

I broke off as Richman coughed. His face grew congested with blood; his voice was raw and hoarse. Spasmodically his eyes encircled the room, but he seemed to see nothing familiar. Stephan stroked back his hair until the seizure passed.

"I—I'm sorry about this," I blurted out. Turning, I strode quickly from the room and closed the door behind me.

I FOUND it difficult to get back to sleep. For one thing the incident in the garden had chilled me. For another I tried half-heartedly, as one will do on the brink of sleep, to follow the muted drone of Stephan's voice. Twice within an hour I got out of bed and paced the floor while I smoked a cigarette. The second time I ventured into the hall, the better to hear Stephan's words. He was reading from *Peter Ibbetsen.*

Richman coughed intermittently throughout the early hours of the morning. It was after three before I fell asleep, and Stephan was still reading to him.

It was a short night. Stephan awakened me at six o'clock. He was greatly excited, and apparently had had no sleep at all. I went at once with him to Richman's room, where we found the invalid in delirium.

"I'm afraid it's the end, sir. He fell asleep about four, then awoke a few moments ago as you see him now. I've already sent word to Doctor Bronson."

I sat on the bed and felt Richman's brow. It was feverishly warm. He breathed strenuously, the short, shallow gasps of a bronchial patient. His eyes were wide open, but they were hopelessly wild.

"Beth," he groaned, "Beth, Beth. . . ."

I combed back his hair, tidied the covers about his neck. There was nothing to be done for him until the doctor came. I said as much to Stephan, but the old servant faithfully persisted in every trifling ministration of comfort.

Doctor Bronson arrived half an hour later. He was a short, brisk-mannered man of middle fifties; a New Yorker.

"It's serious," he admitted gravely, "but just what that means I can't say. I advise immediate hospitalization. He needs expert nursing.

"You know I can't send him to a hospital," said Stephan. "Not him!"

"Poor devil," murmured Bronson with a shake of his head. "I wonder if Beth would follow him to a hospital."

So Bronson was a conspirator too!

That fatal name impinged upon Richman's delicate mind. He choked on, and swallowed, some matter from his mouth.

"Beth? Beth!"

Stephan moved apprehensively closer.

"Does he feel pain, Doctor?"

"Discomfort more or less," said Bronson abstractedly. "That doesn't worry me. I worry about a lucid spell. Mental cases often have them just before the end. All the——"

"The end?" repeated Stephan in a hushed voice. "Does it really mean he's going—to die?"

The physician nodded. "I'm afraid so, Stephan. He's hung on a long time, considering his condition. Remember I gave him only six months to live. That was a year ago."

Stephan's voice broke out passionately: "That was before he met her!"

"Yes, and I'm afraid he'll lose her now. That lucid spell I mentioned—it'll expose his Beth for the unreal creature that she is. It'll be a damned bad moment for him."

I spoke then: "You mean he'll know the truth about her?"

"It's probable."

"We can't let it happen," Stephan cried. "I'd rather see him dead than ever know!"

"We can scarcely intervene," put in

Bronson sharply. "Of course, I may be wrong. He may pass on still believing in her."

"Is it likely?" I asked.

"No. I'm sorry." Bronson stood up. "If worst comes to worst we'll tell him she's gone on a trip, or something."

"But suppose this lucid spell lasts days, weeks even?"

Bronson was silent.

"No!" cried Stephan. "We can't let this happen to Mr. Richman. It would be better to give him an injection now than ever let him know the truth."

"There's a limit to what we can do for him," remarked the physician. "We'll do all we can, naturally. An opiate might help as a last extremity."

Richman suddenly sat up in bed and propped himself on his elbows. He blinked his eyes several times before getting his focus.

"Is that you, Beth?" he asked.

He was looking at Bronson.

BRONSON stepped to the bedside and put his hand on Richman's shoulder. "It's I," he said. "Bronson. Beth is—is on her way to you."

Richman fell back. "I'm glad," he whispered through dry lips. "She can help me—breathe—better." His head rolled disconsolately on the pillow.

Bronson removed his stethoscope from his pocket and applied it to Richman's chest. He was as intent as if listening to a far-off voice.

"That," he muttered, "was a bit too exciting for him."

Richman's head stopped rolling. He lifted it, looked into Bronson's eyes. A rueful smile touched his mouth.

" 'Scoping again, Doc? No good. Send Beth instead. Tell her to please hurry."

Bronson lifted his brows; he was evidently surprised by the coherence of Richman's voice. Was this the lucid spell?

"Beth is coming," he said hastily. He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Tell Mrs. Richman to hurry, Kenyon. I don't believe she heard us the first time."

This was to assuage Richman's anxiety, of course; but it left me holding the bag. I would have remained rooted to the spot if his eyes had not told me to leave the room—to pretend at least.

I went out as he bade, and stopped the moment I was in the hall. Bronson followed me by half a minute.

"We've got to do something," he cried. "I was a fool to say that, I suppose, but damn the man's eyes! Have you ever seen a pleading dog, Kenyon?"

"This complex should have been nipped in the bud," I retorted. "You should have known that some day——"

"Fine talk now! He's in there waiting for her. What are we going to do?"

"I believe you mentioned an opiate?"

"I'm afraid you're right." Bronson cast a meditative glance at the sickroom door. "Damn! I left my bag in the car. Come down with me, Kenyon."

We were on the front porch when Stephan joined us. He was at his wit's end.

"Please do something," he begged. "He's demanding to know why she doesn't come. What can I tell him? Suppose he gets up and looks for her?"

It was a new peril to consider. Bronson and I exchanged glances.

"I've an idea," he said suddenly. "My office nurse—you remember her, Stephan—has a faint resemblance to his portrait of Elizabeth. With the curtains drawn and the light down low——"

He left off under Stephan's steady scrutiny.

"Of course," he went on after a moment, "it may seem rather a brutal trick, but considering the circumstances he could not detect the difference. I mean, it's not as if his Elizabeth were a real person. She can't be as vivid to him as all that."

"No?" I inquired. "What of that portrait?"

"Well, after all, we've nothing to lose by it."

"Nothing to lose!" repeated Stephan. "Think of *him* when you say that. Suppose we did get your nurse? And suppose he detected the difference? Which one of us would explain that to him?"

"It seems to me," I remarked, "that we're making entirely too much of this. Let's get your nurse, Bronson. For a few dollars she would be willing to sit on his bed and hold his hand until the end. You said it might not be long."

Neither Bronson nor Stephan responded to this suggestion. The uneasy silence was at last broken by Richman's impatient "Beth" from upstairs.

"I'll stay with him," I continued. "Stephan had better go to town with you and instruct your nurse in the essential details."

"Very well. It's better than nothing." Bronson seemed to be a trifle short-tempered. "Keep your eye on Richman. "Don't let him get out of bed. And keep him well covered. We'll be as quick as we can."

I WATCHED the car until it carried them out of sight; then I went upstairs to my own room and dressed. As I was shaving I heard a sigh from Richman's room. I felt a little ashamed that I had not looked at him sooner. After drying my face I went through the communicating doors of the bathroom and found Richman motionless on the bed.

He was dead.

Death, apparently, had come only a few moments before I entered the room. His body was extended its full length on the bed; both hands were crossed on his chest; his eyes were closed. The lingering phase of a smile rested on his lips.

Something about him struck me as being odd; the smile for one thing—it did not become a man who had died in suspense and agony.

I walked closer and studied his face. His muscles were relaxed. He looked happy—happier than he had ever looked in life.

A vague irritation stirred my mind. I walked slowly around the bed to examine him from another angle. When I reached his far side I imagined I smelled a weak perfume.

This brought me up alertly. I turned toward the hall door and listened. There was no immediate sound, although I had the impression that some sound had just escaped my notice.

Walking into the hall I looked to the right and left. The door to the attic was slightly ajar. I reached it in four strides and stood still to listen. A faint swishing sound reached my ears. It might have been anything, from the moving of a dress to the dropping of leaves on the roof.

I ran up the steps and stopped at the open studio door. The perfume was stronger now; it seemed to come from a vase of white roses on a table near by.

The studio was aglow with morning sunlight. Motes of dust scintillated in the air.

The life-size portrait of Elizabeth, bathed in the warm light, was like a living thing. Her eyes shone; her white teeth glistened. For a moment, transfixed by her gaze, I was awed. Then suddenly I noticed that her left hand, which yesterday had held a pale blue handkerchief, was now empty.

I could not trust my senses. Perhaps the shadows of last night had deceived me; there may not have been a handkerchief. I did not know. Nor did I know for certain a moment later when I walked into the studio; but lying on the floor beneath the easel, as if dropped in flight, was a pale blue handkerchief.

"She fell back, her face all gone frostily dry."

Forbidden Cupboard

By FRANCES GARFIELD

What was that shape of horror that lifted its tenuous arms out of the dark cupboard?

WHEN I had panted up the two flights of stairs and set down my suitcase, I saw that Father O'Neil was standing at the open door of my new flat. He was the very picture of chubby, priestly embarrassment.

"The place isn't ready yet, Miss Colt," he protested. "We didn't expect you until tomorrow, you know."

"Yes, but I took an earlier train," I replied, "and the expressman's bringing up my trunk."

The good father looked at me thoughtfully. With his round belly, his black garments and comfortable warmth of nature, he reminded me of an old-fashioned depot stove. Even though his face was solemn just now, its rosy cheer was like a glow of friendly flame.

"Well, come in," he said at last. "I

don't see how I can keep you on your own doorstep," and he managed a smile. "I promised to look after you, and I shall. I'm in charge here. Probably you think the arrangement odd."

"Oh, not at all," I made haste to say, though I burned with curiosity to know why a priest doubled as landlord. It was all because of Lola Knesbec, my old professor of boarding-school English, that I was taking the flat. She knew that I hoped to live and write in New York, and that I wanted the cheapest of comfortable lodgings.

Her old friend, Father O'Neil, was renting flats in an ancient house on the border of Greenwich Village. There was an exchange of letters, careful consideration of my financial and character references . . . and here I was, at once delighted and mystified by the situation.

I entered, and almost squealed in delight.

"You like it, Miss Hampton?" asked Father O'Neil.

"Tremendously!" I assured him, and I did. No tawdry stage-set this, simulating a crass dream of a Village studio with cushioned divans, batik hangings and conflicting colors; no, nor was it imitation Park Avenue, with mock-oriental rugs and plush over-stuffings. The huge living-room was papered in fawn brown up to the lofty ceiling, with heavy carved molding, and the open fireplace—a real one, not a portable sham—had a white marble slab for mantel. The furniture, of massy wood with leather cushioning, bespoke unmodish comfort. A full-length mirror hung opposite the front door. The windows, set high in the front wall, had varnished maple shutters inside. To such a room might Washington Irving once have come to tea, talking of headless horsemen to his crinolined hostess; while, outside the half-open shutters, might have paced and shivered a beautiful, wretched man in unseasonable nankeen, hungry for the lunch he could not buy—Edgar Allan Poe.

"Miss Knesbec was sure you'd like it," smiled the priest. Standing close to a high-silled window, he was bathed from the knees up in gray light from the autumn sky. His shanks were darker and more indistinct, literally wading in floor shadows. He drew out a stubby briar pipe, already filled.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Please do."

And I remembered that I had something else to say, concerning a fascinating tale that Lola Knesbec had hinted.

"I UNDERSTAND that this house once belonged to Guilford Golt," I offered, and waited for a response. It came, and it was more intriguing than I had dared hope. Father O'Neil's face lost some of its pinkness, and the hand that held the pipe seemed to quiver.

"What do you know about Guilford Golt?" he demanded.

"Only that he was an eccentric scholar of the middle Nineteenth Century," I replied. "Miss Knesbec told our class that his character had been used by Fitz-James O'Brien in that story about the wizard who brought evil little toys to life, and by Nathaniel Hawthorne for the alchemical genius in *The Birthmark*——"

"Miss Knesbec was right," said Father O'Neil; "only those tales did not do Guilford Golt grim enough justice."

"And didn't this house once belong to him?" I pursued.

"It did," the priest nodded. "Golt conducted many experiments in it—experiments that escaped legal notice because legal men scorn to believe such things. But he and his works were baleful. A group of citizens visited him one night in a very vengeful mood—he had made himself too dreadful a figure, even for the strange and tolerant community that was New York

nearly a century ago. And in the morning he had vanished.

"I doubt if he was to be frightened," continued Father O'Neil gravely. "He was the sort who had gone beyond fear. But—yes, he was driven away. And he had no heirs. And this house remained closed until recently, when we of the church, as trustees, were asked to put it to some profitable use. And so we are renting flats in it—having taken certain precautions."

As he spoke this last word, his eyes wandered, as if in spite of themselves, to a gray-painted door in the rear of the room. Then he spoke more brightly:

"I've laid a fire ready. Shall I light it?"

"Please," I said, slipping off my coat. The gray door to which his involuntary glance had directed me must be a clothes-closet. I moved toward it and drew down the latch, but it would not open. A great chest of dark wood, that at first had seemed a bar of the low-fallen shadows, had been shoved against the bottom of the door.

"Wait, don't open that door, my child," called Father O'Neil suddenly. He had crouched down to light the fire, but now, moving quickly for so plump a little man, he was at my side. His pleasant face was anxious.

"Not if you say so," I said, rather startled.

He smiled once more, in an obvious effort to reassure me. "The closet must never be opened. In fact it is to be plastered up—then it will be cut off permanently and can be forgotten."

"I doubt if I could pull that chest away, in any case," I smiled back.

"Don't even try."

I moved across the room, to the bedchamber, and laid my coat upon a stout old walnut bed.

"Now to get at my work," I said, coming back into the parlor. "I'm a long jump behind, as usual."

"Then I'll go. I, too, have work." Father O'Neil put his pipe into his mouth and took up his broad, black hat. "I'll be back later, if you don't mind. I'm expecting some workmen. I hope they won't bother you—interrupt your writing."

"It's quite all right," I assured him. "Don't give it a thought. Won't you have tea with me, around four o'clock?" I asked him on impulse. "I feel that we're destined to be friends."

"Thank you, I'll be delighted." And he smiled himself out.

Almost immediately came the expressman with my trunk and suitcase. I began at once to arrange my few possessions and as soon as possible got to work.

It was no inspiring job—merely a panegyric of a business man, even titled by my employer, the doting widow—*Truman Murdock, A Man's Man.* But I set out to do the best I could in a compromise between the canonizing taste of the man's heirs and my own idea of what a biography should be.

I had planned a good first chapter, at least—a widely imaginary pedigree. His patronymic suggested the dashing follower of Roderick Dhu, and I might even quote a few lines of Walter Scott. His mother's name had been Blake—perhaps this made him a connection of William Blake, perhaps even of that Sir Percy Blake who is supposed to have sat for Frans Hals as the *Laughing Cavalier.* All this could be whipped into good copy to get the book off to a readable start. Down I sat to the typewriter, drumming at it page after ambling page. "Each of us," I paraphrased something I had seen in *The Reader's Digest,* "is a great vehicle in which ride all the ghosts of his forefathers. . . ."

What was it that stirred behind me?

I SWUNG quickly around. No living thing was there; I saw only the room, the furniture, the fireplace in which the

blaze had died to a ruddy scattering of coals, the gray closet door spanned by the dark chest. There was the noise again—or was it?

I rose, crossed the floor, and stopped just beside the forbidden closet, listening with both my ears.

Silence now. I might have been mistaken, nervous in a new house, excited by Father O'Neil's air of mystery. Who, and in what stodgy book, has said that an imaginative mind is bad for the nerves? Standing beside the closet, I wished that Father O'Neil had not been at once insistent and mysterious about my leaving it shut. My impulse to pry was natural and extreme, as with all women in such a situation, clear back to the wife of Bluebeard.

I examined the chest that did duty as obstacle. Heavy, dark, roughly carved, it looked at first like something out of the hold of a pirate ship; but undoubtedly it was only a modern imitation. The lock, for instance, was a new automatic one, and fast. I could not lift the lid. The closet door, by contrast, was not locked at all. Indeed, it had not even a keyhole—only a heavy iron latch, painted dull gray like the rest of the panel, and once before I had lifted it.

Looking closely now, I saw that there was a mark in the paint above that latch, a line undoubtedly scraped when the paint had been fresh. A cross; no, it was more than a cross. At the upper end of the vertical bar was attached a sickle-like curve. I had seen such a device before, in my childhood, and had heard an old Irish cook call it the "God-have-mercy sign." What was such a sign doing here?

My mind turned again to Guilford Golt. The legend, so skimmed over by Lola Knesbec and now by Father O'Neil, had credited him with belief, if not power, in black magic. Did this closet have something to do with the tale? If so, why did not the priest bring such a knowledge into the light instead of plastering the door shut? The amateur-detective impulse, which surely makes up part of every human soul, became strong and insistent.

I bent, seized the handle at the side of the chest, and tried to drag it away. Who could have refrained from such an effort? But the weight momentarily baffled me. In the midst of my tugging, I let go and straightened up guiltily. A sharp ringing sound filled the room.

The telephone—I hadn't even noticed that there was one. It rang again, and yet again, while I walked toward it. The raucous summons angered me for a moment, and I snatched up the instrument with a needlessly sharp "Hello!"

"Hello," said a high, drawling voice, hard to classify as male or female, young or old. "I want to order a ton of coal."

"You have the wrong number," I replied.

"But I bought coal there last year," protested the drawl. "Isn't this Chelsea 3-0036?"

It was, as a glance at the instrument's foot showed me; but I could only repeat that I had no coal for sale.

"You used to sell coal," insisted the voice reproachfully.

"There's some mistake," I said, and somehow felt as if I were shirking my duty. "This is a private home." And I hung up.

Just like a telephone, I thought savagely; interrupting my work—but I hadn't been working. I had been about to investigate that closet.

I walked back to the chest. The problem, I felt, must be faced; Father O'Neil had not wanted me to open the door, but I must prove to myself that I did not fear that little scratching noise, if indeed there had been a noise. And I needed storage space.

Again I bent, seized the chest, and

this time succeeded in dragging it slantingly back from its position.

Again sound—shrill now, and tuneful. It flowed in and filled the room, but from outside.

Mystified and intrigued, I hurried to the window. It was open a crack, and I lifted it all the way and leaned out.

THE musical shrilling came from a penny whistle, and the ragged old man who played it was getting real melody out of his tawdry instrument. He was playing *Annie Laurie,* from which, as I peered out at him, he shifted to *Bonnie Doon.* Then he saw me, and ceased to play at all. Taking the whistle from his mouth, he gazed up at my window.

"Please, kind lady!" he bawled winningly.

My purse lay on that very sill, and I quickly opened it and fumbled out six copper pennies. These I flung down to him. They fell in a little rain about my serenader who, stooping quickly, retrieved the coins with eagerly darting clutches. In thanks he doffed the filthiest tweed cap I ever saw, played me a little chirpy flourish on his whistle, and tramped away.

A more pleasant dissuasion, that, from my attempt on the closet's secret. . . . I frowned. Was Providence marshaling these telephones and whistles against me, to hold me back from flouting Father O'Neil's wish? I toyed with the fancy for only a moment, then told myself that it sprang from a falsely guilty conscience. I went straight, and purposefully to the chest, once more clutched its handle, and drew it away with a mighty heave. Straightening up, I pressed down the latch and opened the closet door.

I looked into absolute blackness, a formless and spacious cave of it; it was as though there were no sides or back to the little nook, as though it were, instead, a vast and lightless valley. But close to me, so close that it must have dangled against the door when shut, hung something.

An old garment, was my first thought. I was about to step in and examine it, when my eyes were drawn to the inner side of the open door. It was covered with writing, crude, heavy writing as if it were done with a coarse instrument—even a human finger. I wondered what kind of ink could have turned such a rusty brown, and began to read:

They are shutting me up in here to die. They think they are rid of me—but I'll live. Life, in some sort, will be mine forever. The rotting of my flesh and my bones will only make my spirit free.

I write this in my own blood. They left me nothing else. I'm not done with this world. Whenever this prison is opened . . .

I was intrigued, and amused. Was this the bizarre legend that Father O'Neil had known of the place, and had hesitated telling me because it was so dreadful? The very fact of its being written in human blood was enough to discredit it with me. Melodramatic stuff from the paper-backed thrillers. I must chide him for judging me a simple, credulous child. I moved back, smiling, and saw a fluttery movement in the fabric-like hanging in the dark closet.

I turned to look again. There was a filmy openwork about it, like lace or net. Not a garment, after all; more probably a grubby gray curtain, stowed away here and forgotten. . . .

But does a curtain hold itself erect, to the width and height of a human figure, without hook or rod to support it at the top? Does a curtain turn toward you an unshapen upper roundness like an ill-modeled head, that shows two black caverns like a mockery of eyes, and does a curtain lift slowly a pair of ragged trails so that they seem to gesture and grope like skinny arms?

Does a curtain drift slowly from its place, and come toward you, as if it wanted to catch and grapple you?

I FELL back and away, my face gone all frostily dry and my legs suddenly bereft of stiffening bone, drained of living blood. The thing left its shadowed hiding, pausing for only an instant on the threshold. I had a good view of it. No, no curtain—no honest fabric at all. The cloudy mass of it, like a concentration of lint and dust and smoke, stirred in all its particles, yet clung to a filmy shape-travesty of a human being. The dull black eye-blotches narrowed themselves, as if the gray light were too strong. And then it drifted into the open, around the chest, and at me.

Its arms raised themselves to a level with the face. I saw, with an increase of disgusted horror, that its hands had no fingers—they flapped like dusty mittens, opening and extending, to take hold of me. My own hands drew up to fight back. My heart had become a giant fist, trying to batter free from my ribs. For by some fantastic telepathy, I knew what the creature wanted.

He intended to don me, as a human being puts on a garment, clothe himself in my flesh for his devil's doings. This was the thing that had been shut away from the world for so long—was now visiting its wrath and will upon me—once Guilford Golt, the sorcerer, now a fiend made stronger and ghastlier by death's change.

Something was blocking my retreat. I tried to scream at the touch of it, but achieved only a sigh. The wall, beside my writing-table, was at my shoulder-blades. Within reach of my hand lay my dictionary, bought last week for a dollar in a second-hand bookstore. I clutched it, hurled it with all my force. It struck, square upon the cheek, or where the cheek should be. The book did not make a noise, did not stop its flight. It flew through and past—into the inky blackness of the closet.

Where it had struck was a ragged notch. I could see the wall through it. The shape did not pause or falter. It drifted closer, I felt, like a crushing weight, its purposeful menace.

Its arms spread now, horizontally, to pin me against the wall. I thought to dodge away. Too late! I was caught in the angle of the wall and the table. The torn, musty head seemed to crinkle up its surface below the eyes, as though it were smiling for all its lack of mouth.

The window—could I reach it, lift it, scream for help? Jump out? Too late for that, too. The dirt-fluff mittens were soaring up before my face, fumbling to touch my neck. An aura of dust thickened in my nose and throat. A wave of cold passed over me like a shaking buffet, dimness weighted my eyelids, my head lolled upon my shoulders as if it were imperfectly fastened there. The round head, the dull eye-patches, were within inches of my face. I could not cry out.

But suddenly the creature shrank back, as shaken as I had been. Something had started, dismayed it. There! A noise, coming again to my rescue.

A knock, loud and free, at the door. After a moment, a voice:

"Miss Hampton?"

Father O'Neil was outside. And the thing knew him. I had no doubt the thing had been outfaced by Father O'Neil, and feared him; so might a more forbidding creature fear what a priest could and would do. . . . It retreated more swiftly, falling, almost, back on its trail through the room.

All at once I could breathe again, could hold myself erect without the help of the wall.

"Miss Hampton, may I come in?" asked Father O'Neil again.

The filmy grayness had gained the open door of the closet, drooping abjectly in its hurry to seek shelter there. It drew itself inside, making itself small and dark, to match the shadows. I managed to hurry after, to throw myself across the dragged-away chest, to fall against the panel, swinging it shut with my weight.

My fingers groped to the latch, lifted it, and let it fall into place.

"F—Father O'Neil!" I found my voice at last. "Yes. Come in."

And my front door opened. Still sagging against the closet door, I turned to face that blessedly welcome visitor, all hearty girth and churchly blackness and rosy, beaming face.

"I'm afraid that I'm just a few minutes early for tea," he began, and then broke off, staring at me. "Why, Miss Hampton. What are you doing at that door?"

Quickly he hurried across to me.

I DREW away, came around the chest once more and faced him.

"You weren't really going to open the closet?" he chided me earnestly.

I shook my head mutely and with absolute honesty. Not all the publisher's gold, the critics' acclaim, the reading public's patronage, would ever tempt me to put my hand on that latch again.

Father O'Neil bent. With a quick, solid shove, he moved the chest back into its sentinel place against the bottom of the door.

"Once more, I urge you never to look into that closet, Miss Hampton," he addressed me solmenly as he drew himself erect once more. "The plasterers will be here within an hour. Meanwhile I am forced to ask you for your promise."

"I promise," I assured him with husky eagerness.

The priest smiled approval, and helped me to set out the tea-things. My hands, deadened as though by injection of some drug, could not help but shake. And Father O'Neil noticed.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, my child," he apologized gently. "Yet it is important—extremely important—that the closet door remain shut forever." He looked at me calculatingly. "I was tempted for a moment to tell you everything; but I doubt if you'd believe the story."

I nodded. I had learned too much already, ever to have complete peace of mind again. I had known the breath and face of a danger more dire than anything that threatens only the flesh. That danger had been averted. Father O'Neil had saved me without himself knowing how close a call it had been.

I made a sudden decision. Just now I held the priest's respect and friendship. He thought that he was protecting me by remaining silent. Why trouble him, worry him, by saying I knew the story of a horror that was now closed up again? Why shake his sturdy courage and mastery of the awful situation? And already the memory was becoming blessedly unreal, dream-like. . . .

"No," I agreed, as brightly as I could manage. "I might not believe it."

The Unveiling

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

An uncanny tale about a great artist who painted emotions

"RAVENOFF'S studio," Parker told the cabman. "Sorry I kept you waiting, people."

"Don't apologize," Buchanan said. "I don't think any of us are in a hurry to view Ravenoff's latest."

"But please, I am!" Patricia Clark protested. "I'm really anxious to see one of what Ted calls Ravenoff's 'diabolical' paintings."

"Ted should be shot at sunrise for bringing you," Parker growled.

"I tried to dissuade her, but——" Ted shrugged expressive shoulders.

"I can't believe Ravenoff's paintings are really so terrible," Pat continued. "When I met him, he seemed such a pet rabbit of a man."

Parker chuckled delightedly. "Ravenoff is an enigma. There's Ravenoff the man; frail-looking, soft-spoken, kind, gentle, considerate. His wife and youngsters adore him. His friends swear by him. But Ravenoff the painter? He's a madman! He seizes a brush, and *voilà!*—he's possessed of a devil! He slaps pigments on with wild, slathering strokes and vicious jabs. He doesn't harmonize colors; he clashes them. He doesn't paint human beings; he strips civilization and convention away and paints emotions, the base, cruel, terrible emotions. He paints stark fear and sheer terror and grisly horror and bestial cruelty only as one who has lived through them can paint them."

"As one who has lived through them?" prompted Pat.

"Ravenoff was the child of aristocrats when the Russian revolution broke. They let *him* live. To kill him would have been too easy, too kind. But his pitiful, starved body and cringing soul absorbed the fear and terror, the horror and cruelty, and survived. Now he paints those things with such vivid reality and intensity that pigment and canvas cannot hold them imprisoned. They leap out at you to fill your bloodstream and inflame your brain. You grind your teeth with rage or hate; you break out in a cold sweat of fear; or overpowering greed or cruelty possesses your soul—or should I say dispossesses it?" He turned to Buchanan. "Did you see his first great picture, *Beelzebub?*"

Buchanan shuddered. "And had nightmares for weeks. And *Greed* was even more repulsive. The bestial expressions on the faces of the rabble, the utter cruelty of their grasping, claw-like hands—ugh! Thank Heaven I was too late to see *Hate.*"

"I think nobody regretted the fate of that picture," Parker said, then answered the question in Pat's eyes. "A local millionaire bought it and presented it to the Public Museum. People would go and stare at it until hate burned in their eyes and distorted their features. Two people went away and committed murder under its influence before an attendant was stationed beside it to keep people moving. For three days he performed that duty. The fourth day he didn't show up."

"Why?" Pat asked.

"Your fiancé covered the case for the paper."

"And may I never cover another like

it!" Ted breathed. "He was a likable old chap, but his domestic life had evidently been anything but happy. He brought home the money. His wife and two grown-up daughters squandered it for him, nagging constantly because there was not more. After three days with that picture he murdered the lot of them in the most brutal fashion imaginable. Next day someone slashed the painting to ribbons. Ravenoff's next picture was *War,* but it was sold privately to a collector and has never been publicly exhibited."

"What ghastly titles!" Pat said. *"Beelzebub! Greed! Hate! War!"*

"And now *Death.*"

Patricia shuddered. "I'd think Ravenoff would want to forget such things, or keep them hidden in his mind instead of perpetuating them on canvas."

Buchanan shook his head. "To forget them he must first work them out of his system. People who bottle up things in their minds brood over them and go mad. The pressure becomes too great and the bottle bursts; then *all* their mind, instead of just part, is affected. Psychiatrists bring such things into the open to be dispelled, just as matter from a festering sore is got rid of so the injured part can heal cleanly. Perhaps when Ravenoff has rid his mind of the unpleasant emotions, his kinder, gentler self may gain dominance over his brush, and he may give us—but here we are."

ALIGHTING, Parker eyed the cars parked solidly on both sides of the street. "Not a very exclusive unveiling, I'm afraid," he apologized. "Even model-T Fords!"

"Sure! Didn't you hear what the old geezer who bought the picture done yesterday?" the driver asked. "Chartered a cab for the afternoon." He indicated Parker's invitation, taken from his wallet with the fare. "He had a stack of them things. Yeah, he filled 'em in that way, too: Admit So-and-so and friends, and he told 'em no limit to the number of friends, 'cause he wanted everyone to see this picture."

"To whom did he give the invitations?"

"Cripes, everybody, Mr. Parker! Workmen on buildings, folks in stores, truck drivers, shoppers, folks in the West End and the East End and the Ghetto and Chinatown, on the docks and—well, he covered the city. While I unloaded a gent here at two o'clock, along come a Kosher butcher I know, with forty-three relatives. I counted 'em! And a little Eyetalian bootblack brought all his relatives from his great-grandmothers down to the latest flock of bambinos. And three Chinese in tails and toppers—say, they've had to let folks in in relays. Thank you, sir. Thanks!"

Parker joined his guests. "Up this driveway," he said.

"Look!" Patricia gestured. "The people coming out!"

"A motley crowd, certainly!" Parker said. "I understand Neville Walker went into the highways and byways to invite all and sundry, not to mention their friends and relatives. Rather perverted sense of humor, if you could call——"

"No, no! I mean their expressions. Look at that woman's face."

Parker did. His gaze followed the woman after she had passed.

"They're all like that," Patricia said. "They don't notice us. They all look as if they were seeing a vision."

THEY followed Parker to the barn-like studio behind the house. Ravenoff's secretary received them in an ante-room where a dozen people already waited.

"Monsieur Ravenoff was suddenly called away," he said. "He left a note asking me to express his regret that he could not greet you personally and show you his painting." He waved toward the studio

door. "The others are nearly all out now."

And presently the last of the others emerged, and the secretary ushered the latest comers in. The only lighting in the studio was at the far end before a great drape that entirely hid the end wall.

"Monsieur Ravenoff wishes you to look at the painting as long as you wish," the secretary said, "but he does not wish you to advance beyond the rail. The painting is so large, he says, that only from back here can you get the proper perspective."

He vanished. Something whirred. The drapes slid aside and there was the painting. One or two gasped; then there was silence, utter and complete.

On the great canvas, as wide and as high as the studio wall itself, not one in that silent audience saw what had been expected. Only at one end did colors clash. There one saw the trenches and shattered buildings, the shell-torn trees and wrecked bridges of a battlefield, and people, infinitely weary people, coming away, staggering, stumbling, some with improvised crutches, some crawling, some without arms or legs, some without sight.

And there was a great city of factories and foundries, docks and railroad yards, store and office buildings and traffic-congested streets. At a railroad crossing was a wrecked train and school bus. On a mountainside a great airplane had crashed. On a rocky coast a ship was pounding to pieces. Beyond, a village was being devastated by an earthquake. Everywhere, in some form or other, was Death, and people coming, some crippled, some whole, some with hopeless defeat in their bearing, some with a look of great questioning, but all converging toward the path leading up the storm-swept hill, to meet and mingle and toil onward and upward.

And presently they passed out of the storm clouds to sunshine and flowers and singing birds, and then they did not look so tired or so defeated, but their eyes were alight with hope. And reaching the top of the hill none were crippled or deformed, for no longer did the discarded mortal body encumber them; and on each face was infinite peace and joy as they scattered, the children to play in flower-strewn fields, the elders to wander by twos and threes into the sunlit vistas beyond.

And the gaze of those in the studio came back, from time to time, to the words lettered along the bottom of the great canvas: "Death is not fearsome or terrible. Death is a beautiful, shining adventure."

IT WAS Buchanan who broke the silence at last. "Wonderful! Magnificent!" he said. "But Ravenoff slipped up on one tiny detail."

"What might that be?" Ted asked.

"The shadows cast by that figure down in the corner of the battlefield. See it, right down in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas; the figure of a man with the bullethole in his forehead and the blood running down his face onto the revolver clutched in his hand. The shadows are on the wrong side."

"Merciful heaven!" There was horror in Ted's voice. He leaped the rail and raced forward. He stooped. When he straightened, his face was a mask of horror. He moved between the figure and the canvas.

"It—it's Ravenoff!" he said.

Up from Earth's Center through the Seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
And many a Knot unraveled by the Road;
But not the Master-knot of Human Fate.
—Omar Khayyam.

Lips of the Dead

By W. J. STAMPER

"DOWN with Théodor! Death to Black Oscar!"

It was the raucous, horrifying yell of the inevitable Haitian mob as it assembled in the historic Champs de Mars outside the palace in Port au Prince, the scene of hundreds of such meetings that had never meant less than murders and gutters flowing red with human blood. The rapacious rule of President Théodor and his favorite general, Black Oscar, was tottering to its fall. That day Théodor had violated a sacred session of the Senate and dissolved it at the point of the bayonet because it had, for the second time, refused to support him in a dastardly measure to filch more money from the already pauper citizenry.

As night came on, aged senators lay cringing in the filthy prison, in the courtyard of the palace, and double sentinels paced the flagstones outside.

In the domed council chamber of the palace sat Papillon, the favorite senator of the common people, bound hand and foot, subjected to the jeers and insults of the two human beasts. Théodor, lean and emaciated, his yellow, pock-marked face pinched with terror, fingered nervously some loose papers that lay on the table. Oscar, a giant in stature, with a waxed mustache curling up crescent-shaped till the two points almost met above his gaping, black nostrils, pounded his huge fist on the table and fixed his sinister gaze on Papillon.

"Do you think we sleep, idiot?" he stormed. "It is your tongue that has sown the seeds of unrest among the populace and stirred them to rebellion against our authority. What have you to say to this—and this?" He thrust two papers into the face of Papillon, and his black face twitched with rage.

"I should think it would be unnecessary for *le général* to rob the mails for the same information he might easily obtain by listening to any group of citizens conversing on our street corners. It is the sentiment of all true Haitians. You have robbed the coffers of the treasury; you have murdered our best citizens; and now you seek the aid of the Senate in carrying out your cursed schemes," sarcastically answered Papillon.

Stung by the truth of this remark, Oscar lifted his great fist and crashed it against the thin lips of the helpless prisoner. Blood streamed from the cracked lips, ran down the chin and stained the white bosom of the senator's shirt. Papillon, still holding high his proud head, mumbled through his bleeding lips:

" 'Tis no better nor redder than that you spilled at Mole St. Nicholas when you shot down Vilbrun, or when you butchered the patriot, Céléstin, at Jacmel. It is the blood of Haiti."

As Papillon finished speaking, in through the window shone the baleful red glare of the torches of the mob, and through the casement came frenzied yells: "Down with Théodor! Death to Oscar!"

"Has not *le général* some plan? Something must be done," he whined.

"If they become unruly we can toss—we can toss them a head," answered the black brute as he curled his waxed mustache and shot a wicked glance at the bleeding Papillon.

"I have ever been the first to draw my sword for Haiti—I have lived for her and her misguided people—and, *mon général,* I shall gladly offer my life and my blood for her," came from the puffed lips of the prisoner.

"Cur! Worshipper of Voodoo!" shrieked Théodor as he confronted Papillon. "You shall speak to the vermin from yonder window—order them to return to their homes, or I swear by the great Capoix, your head shall roll at their feet."

"Excellency, I am at your service. Such has been the course of liberty for a thousand years—blood, torture, death. Long live the common people! Long live liberty!"

Without another word Théodor seized him by the collar, lifted him from the chair, snatched the gleaming sword from the scabbard and plunged it through the body of the patriot. With a gurgling groan Papillon sank to the floor, while a crimson stream, gushing from a jagged wound in the breast, poured over the carpet of the room. Then with one horrible stroke Théodor severed the head from the trunk. The gory thing, rolling a few feet, stood upright on the bloody, slippery stub, then slid across the room to the wall. There it sat in the pale light of the lamp, and the hair, still unruffled, was smoothly parted in the middle. Then occurred the most singular awe-inspiring thing that ever greeted the eyes and ears of mortal man. What do men yet know of the mysteries of Voodoo—its powers—the miracles it may perform?

Two great tears oozed from the eyes and dropped to the floor. The dead lips moved and a voice issued from the crimson mouth.

"Tomorrow, Théodor, tomorrow!"

Slowly the quivering lids closed over the glazing eyeballs, then opened, and the eyes fixed in the icy stare of death.

Théodor laughed a hoarse, bestial laugh, wiped the thickening gore from his blade on the leg of his trousers and said: "Tomorrow, Théodor, tomorrow! A pretty speech indeed, General."

PICKING up the ghastly head by the long black hair and holding it as far away as possible, Théodor walked to the window and deliberately hurled it out into the very face of the mob, yelling through the casement as he watched it catapult across the street: "Haitians, this is but the beginning! Depart at once, lest all the others meet the fate of Papillon."

Screams of rage rent the night. Crash on crash of musketry raked the street below. The mob had rushed the gate and the troops had opened fire.

It was the terrified voice of Théodor. "We must flee, General! To the French legation for our lives!"

"My soldiers will defend the palace to the last man, Excellency. If we must go down, let us go down in a blaze of blood. To the prison!"

The helpless senators cringed beneath the covers as the sentinel passed. His clanking bayonet scabbard sent a hollow sound through the corridors, while his footfalls sounded like some weird echo in an empty tomb.

A key grated in the lock. Théodor and Oscar entered, and the murderous work began. Silently they went from man to man. There was a sickening slushing sound as the sharp points of their blades found the vitals of those dark masses beneath the ragged covers of the rickety bunks.

Now and then a stifled groan, a rattle in the throat, which was suddenly choked by a rush of blood. This ghastly work lasted but a few minutes, and a crime was consummated that will forever brand Haiti as an outlaw among nations. With his own hands, Oscar put out the one dim light, and following in the wake of the

butcher, left the room to darkness and the dead.

Their vile work finished, Théodor and Oscar fled through the night and sought shelter at the French legation.

Daylight revealed their absence from the palace. News of the massacre spread like wildfire to every nook and corner of the city. The troops defending the palace fled when they discovered their chiefs had deserted them. Papillon had been followed in death by all the other senators, and their souls cried aloud for vengeance.

Groups of cursing men and weeping women rushed from house to house, from hiding-place to hiding-place. Swift horsemen galloped over the roads leading to Gonaïves and Saint Marc in search of the fugitives.

The sun was low in the heavens, when at length came word that Théodor and Oscar had been found in hiding at the French legation. The bugles sounded the assembly, and the bloodthirsty mob, armed with axes, spades, and whatever other weapons could be procured, moved upon the legation. The streets were choked with a seething, writhing mass of humanity, undulating like some huge serpent as it approaches its prey.

The warning voice of the gray-haired consul, as he stood on the portico of the legation house, pleading with the bloodthirsty mob to remember the sacredness of an embassy, was drowned with rasping yells.

"Give us Théodor! Give us Black Oscar!"

There was a sudden irresistible surge of that black mass. The gate and fence went down with a crash. On, on, up to the very doors it went. There was a splintering of wood, a rattling of broken glass, screams and shrieks. Oscar was dragged out first, and his body riddled with bullets.

As his black carcass lay in the gutter, oozing red from a thousand punctures, and the thick tongue lolled out from between the yellow teeth, cheer after cheer went up from the multitude.

THE exit of Théodor was more orderly. With downcast eyes his lean figure shambled out of the building between three huge blacks, one of whom carried three stout ropes. The mob gave back to permit ample passage, and strangely enough the street looking westward was without a single soul. There was at last a peculiar system, even in its innate madness, in which this mob carried out its vengeance.

The prisoner arrived at the edge of the street amid deafening shouts: "Murderer, where is our Papillon?"

A buggy arrived, pulled by a strong Haitian mule.

Now, as if by mutual consent, the three blacks took charge of the situation. They proceeded to secure the end of one rope about the neck of Théodor, the other end to the axle of the buggy. The other two ropes were fastened above the ankles, leaving one end of each free. The ropes about the ankles were, however, much longer than the one about the neck. As certain ones of the mob grasped the intention of the three blacks they gave loud and prolonged cheers of approval.

At last all was ready. The buggy was in motion toward the west. Théodor, striving to keep on his feet, had his legs jerked from under him by the two men manning the loose ends of the ropes about the ankles. He was bruised beyond description. His neck was scarred and bleeding from the noose, his tongue swollen and covered with dust. Bloody froth oozed from his nose and mouth as he was jolted from one side of the street to the other.

Suddenly he ceased to struggle and strive to keep his feet. There was apparent a certain limpness of the body that gave

evidence of unconsciousness. Two trails of red showed in the street behind where the body was being dragged. Sharp stones wearing through the clothing had bit into the bare flesh.

Onward this weird procession went, followed by the crowding, yelling, approving mob, onward toward the west. At length the buggy stopped beneath the shadow of the Sacred Arch. The mob, like hungry vultures encircling a piece of carrion, surged around in a great circle with eyes staring and necks craning lest one single detail of this noisome scene be missed.

There fell upon this vengeful multitude a solemn silence, as from somewhere came the measured beat of the tom-tom—a terrible sound, such a sound as is heard in the fastness of the northern mountains when the priests lead the death-march. One of the blacks was untying the ropes from the gory victim; another was removing the grime and dirt from the distorted face with a damp gunny-sack.

What could this mean? Could it be that the hearts of those two men were relenting? Low growls and sharp hisses escaped from the mob. A bottle of spirits, the powerful heathen rum, was held beneath the distended nostrils. A few drops were poured into the gaping, bruised mouth.

A convulsive shudder passed through the body. The chest heaved, rose and fell. Consciousness was returning.

The circle had narrowed and the mob was on the point of pouncing upon the reviving victim, when one of the blacks, rising from where he knelt over the prostrate figure, extended his ham-like hand high above his head and shouted with such a stentorian voice that it could be heard by the most distant one of the crowd:

"Are you fools, Haitians? Would you have this beast who has glutted himself upon our reddest blood die before your vengeance has been appeased? Let him writhe in agony; is that not good, countrymen?"

"Yes, yes!" came the answer from every mouth of that vast and blood-craving throng.

A ladder was placed against the face of the Sacred Arch. The last rays of the setting sun shed a purplish light over the city; the drums beat the measured march of the dead. Théodor opened his bleary eyes and shuddered.

Two long ropes were tied under the armpits. Two heavy stones, attached to the other ends, were hurled over the top of the arch. Slowly, but without much difficulty, two men hoisted upward the spare, bedraggled figure of Théodor; upward, till it dangled against the solid wall of the archway. Loud jeers rent the gathering dusk of approaching night: *"Vive le Président! Vive Théodor!"*

Now one of the blacks was mounting the ladder. He carried under his arm a small chest, such as carpenters use.

The mob, expectant, gloating, their hawk-like eyes on the cruel scene, stood breathless—waiting.

At last the top was reached. The black secured the peculiar chest to the topmost rung. The mob surged up about the foot of the ladder. A thousand eager, curious faces were upturned, as he seized the right arm of Théodor, extended it to full length along the wall and, without looking, scrambled among the contents of the chest. He drew out a small hand-ax and a long spike. With one powerful blow he drove the pointed nail through the bony hand, deep into the adobe of the wall.

Beads of black blood trickled down and spattered in the dust below. Mortal agony twisted and distorted the pock-marked face of Théodor, and sharp rasping cries issued from the swollen mouth. Another blow, in strange unison with the beat of the tom-tom, pinioned the other arm. The legs dangled; the body writhed in the throes of

approaching death. The skinny legs were drawn apart. Again, and yet again, rose and fell the fatal ax. There was a gritting sound, such as is made by the surgeon's saw, when the cruel spikes pierced the bones of the feet.

"*Vive Théodor! Vive Théodor!*" shrieked the demoniacal mob.

Mortal man could not long survive such torture. Slowly the head sank down upon the scrawny chest, the eyes bulged from their sockets. The cooling blood had ceased to flow and now merely oozed from around the nails.

Grasping the disheveled hair with his left hand, the black straightened up the bowed head, the ax ascended once more and fell upon the distended leaders of the bare throat.

The mob slunk back as the gory head dropped to the street, rolled a few feet, stood upright on the bloody stub of the neck.

As the glazing eyeballs fixed in the cold stare of death, there issued from the purple lips a scarcely audible murmur:

"Today, Papillon, today!"

Had Black Oscar been yet among the living, he alone, of all that multitude, would have noted how strangely these words from dead lips appeared an answer to the words from other dead lips, once sadly murmured at dead of night, in the domed council chamber of the palace.

MANY of you have objected to our publishing serials, not because they are not good stories, but because a month is a long time to wait between parts of a story. So we are putting it up to you. Shall we continue, as in the past, to give you the best serials obtainable, or do you want us to use that space for more short stories or an additional novelette? Let us hear from you, pro and con.

Finished Game

Henry Hasse writes from Seattle: "If it isn't too late I'd like to register one vote for *Finished Game* as the best story in the October issue. I realize that most of these shorter stories—I think you call them 'filler' stories—never get the recognition they should, but every once in a while one of them pops up that is better than any of the longer pieces. Whoever Harry Butman may be, I'd like to see more by him. Second place to *The Lady of the Bells*—I like Quinn immensely when he isn't writing about Jules de Grandin. And third place to *In the Walls of Eryx*—I'm glad that you include science-fiction stories when they really come under a weird classification. Glad to hear the news that you're to use some Hannes Bok illustrations. I've admired his work for a long time, as have a lot of other fans here on the coast."

The Vampire's Mark

Aranse, Count of Foruthun, writes from Crystal City, Missouri: "Five years ago and a little more I came from Hungary, my native land, to live in the United States. Recently I have decided I know the English well enough to read American literature. I asked a friend of mine what fiction monthly he would recommend. He at once suggested that I peruse your September issue of WEIRD TALES magazine. I must confess I was astounded, stunned, thrilled, shocked, and horrified all in a single sensation. I am well qualified to judge such fiction as you publish, but before I do so, allow me to present my credentials. In my native country I am a nobleman, and to be so means to have a family of long-standing repute. To have such ancient family means to have family legends, and my line of ancestors bears a wealth of these legends, fiction or truth I am not disposed to say. There is just one thing which I will mention to you: My great ancestor, whose first name I now bear, was said to have been a vampire. I might also say that the family castle (as Americans would say, but which in truth is called a manor) is still reputed to be haunted by netherworldly demons. I do not wish to make a stand upon the logic of ghosts, but (do not scoff, readers) I have two small round incisions at the base of my neck which show no signs of healing! I bore them with me from Hungary. . . . G. G. Pendarves wins my vote for first place in the November issue with his utterly surprising and very shocking story *The Withered Heart*. *The Hunch* by Gene Lyle III gets second place, because of the way the full force of the story is flung upon the reader in the surprisingly sudden finis."

Fondest Reading Moments

Donald Jafelice writes from Toronto: "As a WEIRD TALES reader of long standing I have finally urged myself to write to you and express my hearty congratulations for sending me such interesting reading. I have not written before, due to my lack of expression-power, but without the slightest doubt my fondest reading moments have been spent with your superlative unique artists. Lately I have been unable to afford these luxuries, but I did keep up with you through the many 'trade-in and exchange' book stores. I know I have missed some grand stories. When I could not read the new ones I had to revert to my back numbers, which I don't think can ever be surpassed, even among the many competitive authors of today. . . . Many hearty thanks to you and the host of authors which I have become acquainted with during my reading moments. I shall resume the habit of WT for as long as I am able. Thanks for the Eyrie, thanks for Lovecraft, whose great pen has now ceased writing, thanks for Colter, Smith, Quinn, Hamilton and the rest of that eery clan. But definitely, thanks for WEIRD TALES."

He Likes 'em Wild

Robert Bloch, author of *The Dark Isle,* writes: "I was struck in this month's Eyrie, by the letter of Mr. I. O. Evans, my British geography critic. I must plead guilty to revamping the topography of Anglesey—but I feel that I cannot acknowledge his patriotic defense of the druids. My information *in re* druid customs and cruelties comes from one of Mr. Evans' own fellow Britons—the eminent historian-novelist, Robert Graves. Mr. Graves, in his fine volume, *I, Claudius,* is responsible for the druidic information I used in *The Dark Isle.* Insofar as Mr. Graves is a scholar of unquestioned standing, I chose to adhere to his concept of druidism, including the wicker giants, blue paint, *et al.* Nor do the writings of most reputable anthropologists, the esteemed Sir James Frazer amongst them, serve to confute the general opinion as to the wickedness of the vates, bards, and ovates of Britain and Gaul. Druidism is, I grant, a disputable religious tenet, and its workings are shrouded in mystery due to the fact that druid beliefs, customs, and lore were never committed to writing. Also, the druid culture, extending through the British Isles and the mainland of Europe, was subject to geographical divergency. Moreover, during the thousand years or so that druidism was in sway, certain definite changes are observable in its practise. The druids of 400 B.C., for example, lived differently than the druids of 50 A.D., approximately the time of my story. They in turn in nowise resembled the decadent druids of 600 A.D., which I believe is the setting of Munn's fine serial. But rather than embark on a lengthy disquisition on the subject of conjectural druidic custom, I would submit to Mr. Evans that the real authorities—the druids—never had anything to say for themselves. And in consequence, following the guidance of a reputable historian, I permitted my imagination to fashion a story around certain of the facts he presented as such. If Mr. Evans likes his druids tame, I bow to his taste. Me, I like 'em wild."

Rave On

Miss Ethel Tucker writes from Joplin, Missouri: "I can do nothing but rave about the November issue of WEIRD TALES. To be different I should be critical, I suppose, but after having to do without reading your grand magazine for two months, due to a serious operation which affected my eyes, I provided myself with a pair of reading-glasses and proceeded to go wild particularly over *Uncanonized* by my favorite author, Seabury Quinn. Now that is a real beautifully weird story; the thread of tragedy running through it along with the exquisite description of love undying, gives me a feeling of reading a really great story; of course werewolves always have been, to my way of thinking, a good subject to shape a story around. Although I liked most all of the stories, another one I liked especially is *The Withered Heart.* I think it's a rather unusual story and it had me guessing all through it. *Towers*

of Death by that admirable writer Henry Kuttner is wonderful; he used plenty of imagination creating such a horrible character as old Simeon Gerard. There was something about the story of *The Man Who Died Twice* that reminded me of *Towers of Death;* must be because of both old men being so thoroughly evil. I must admit though that one of your stories, *The Web of Silence,* failed to interest me; I could not find much if any weird element about it. . . . Well, here's wishing WEIRD TALES a couple of million new readers and keep up the good work."

New Readers

Knute Savary writes from Niles Center, Illinois: "I think it is a good idea to reduce the price of WEIRD TALES, not that I care about the price, but many new readers will be introduced to the world's best purveyor of fantasy and weird fiction. For myself I would buy the mag if it cost fifty cents."

A Great Writer

Harry Warner, Jr., writes from Hagerstown, Maryland: "Best in the November WT is undoubtedly *Towers of Death.* If only Kuttner could decide which to imitate, Lovecraft, Howard, or Poe, he could undoubtedly come very near reaching their heights. This time, though, I'm not just sure of whom the style resembles. . . . *The Withered Heart* seemed to me a fitting model for any weird yarn. We lost a great writer in the death of that author, and one too little appreciated today. Possibly five years hence she will have gained more recognition."

HPL Reprints

George M. Aylesworth writes from Mackinaw City, Michigan: "*Towers of Death* took first place in the November issue. . . . Let's have some more of Clark Ashton Smith's bizarre tales with his own illustrations and more of those unbeatable HPL reprints. Seabury Quinn was second with *Uncanonized.* An interesting yarn, like all of Quinn's, even when he is relating the adventures of that mercurial little Frenchman, Jules de Grandin. One objection to this latter series, however: the stories often bear a marked similarity to each other in plot, characters, and even dialog. Finlay's cover and inside illustrations were excellent, as usual. His pictorial interpretations of famous poems are always good. Don't discontinue this feature."

King of the World's Edge

Misti Selkirk, antiquary, writes from La Oroya, Peru: "Despite the cavalier shuffling and reallocation of cultures, H. Warner Munn's serial, *King of the World's Edge* is absorbingly interesting to the speculative antiquarian. I was especially intrigued by his scientifically-correct account of the operation of trepanation. While reading that, I was constrained to take down eight specimens from my shelves and to reflect that they, too, underwent the ordeal he describes. That the use of the coca leaves to secure anesthesia may have been known to the tribes of North America is somewhat of a strain upon an archeologist's imagination, but so, also, is the placement of Kukulcan, the Plumed Serpent, among the mound builders. Fantasy aside, have evidences of trepanation been found among the crania of the ancient North Americans? Let it be said, however, that there are few, given the difficulty of absolute proof, who can give the lie direct to Mr. Munn's premises. Be the truth where it may, Mr. Munn gives much food for thought to those of us who pursue the fast-fading trails of ancient man into the dim past of the Western World. I hope that no one will construe my especial attention to Mr. Munn's serial as implying disparagement of the other very excellent stories in the October issue of WEIRD TALES. It was a pleasure to meet again the legend of Bran Mak Morn, although a reprint was not needed to fix in your antiquary's mind that master tale from the pen of the creator of Kull, Kane, and Conan. Let those who carp at the 'happy endings' of the stories in WEIRD TALES be silent as they reflect upon the inarticualte heartbreak so skilfully implied in the perfect ending of *The Lady of the Bells.* Ended as it is, this tale is a worthy companion piece to the same author's *Globe of Memories.* The labyrinthine crystal trap in Sterling's and Lovecraft's *In the Walls of Eryx* gives to an

interplanetary yarn the added something which made a sensation of *Shambleau*. However strong his objection to science-fiction, surely no one can criticize tales like these, which open up new vistas of the weird in spheres far removed from our own. For the degree of Doctor of Belles-lettres Outrés let me propose Mr. Gans T. Field for the human (and feline) understanding displayed in his *The Witch's Cat*. This tale but confirms my belief that Mr. Field is a writer whose tales appear all too seldom in our magazine. Hard, indeed, it is to choose among the tales in the October number, but *King of the World's Edge* and *The Witch's Cat* are outstanding, though the others come so close behind that further selection is impossible."

A Howard Reprint

Dale H. Exum writes from Dallas: "At last we have a Howard reprint! *Worms of the Earth* is the best Howard story I ever read. In an old bookstore not long ago I found a story of WEIRD TALES, several years old, by Howard, called the *Valley of the Worm*. I think it worthy to be reprinted, too. I certainly hope you reprint many more of his stories. But please don't reprint Poe, Hawthorne, etc.—anyone interested in weird literature has read everything these authors ever wrote. I know I have."

Esoteric Articles

Franklin Bristol writes from Mexico City: "I am in accord with the gentleman from England about devoting a page to some articles on esoteric subjects. You say your readers would resent the use of space which might be used for stories? Let's have a show of hands. Why not use the page you ordinarily devote to a synopsis of the coming month's feature story? Surely you can condense that greatly without losing circulation."

On Top of the Heap

William Barrison writes from New York City: "The new low price, the good stories and authors will keep WT at the top of all fantasy fiction. I am now fifteen years old and I have been reading WT since I was eleven."

Conan and Solomon Kane

Bernard E. Schiffmann writes from New York City: "Again I voice the plea as I have done in the past for some of Robert E. Howard's Conan stories in the reprints, preferably some of the older ones, also Solomon Kane. I welcomed his *Worms of the Earth* in your October issue, but would much rather have had Conan or Kane. Again I cry how about all Robert E. Howard's works in book form? I'm sure not only I but thousands of your readers would grab these up. Now to continue, your stories have their usual excellence, which has kept me a steady reader of WEIRD TALES for ten years. I have every issue in my library for the past seven years. Sorry I didn't hold onto the earlier ones. How about C. L. Moore's Northwest Smith, also more of Jirel? Bring back Henry Kuttner's Elak from whatever dark land he has roamed to, also Clifford Ball's Rald. I believe the past success of WEIRD TALES was due to the familiarity of the readers with the heroes of the stories. It is a hundred times more interesting to read of a continued adventure of someone you know than that of a stranger."

Fairy Stories

Leonard J. Fohn writes from Houston, Texas: "May I make a suggestion concerning stories appearing in WEIRD TALES? Since they are, more or less, modernized fairy-stories, why are they lacking in beneficent genii or kindly-disposed sprites? Without the seven dwarfs, Snow White would lose her popularity."

Fight for First Place

Richard Kraft writes from New York City: "After a somewhat mediocre October issue, the November WT came as a distinct 'shot in the arm.' In other words it was darn good. I didn't like *The Haunted Car* or *The Hunch,* but all the rest were top-notch. Gosh, what a fight for first place! After long moments of deliberation I give *The Web of Silence* top rating with Colter's yarn second and Kuttner's third. Quinn wrote a honey (g'bye Jules de Grandin) and Pendarves' last tale was among her best. Awfully glad to see Eli Colter among those present; a real weird

writer. I'll never forget his *The Last Horror*, will you? Before I sign off I'd like to convey to you my appreciation of Virgil Finlay's cover—one of his best, and it *is* weird!"

A Flittermouse Came Chirping

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "Once again Gans T. Field scores a hit, with his *The Witch's Cat*. The thought of kitty talking and thinking logically caused a smile—and didn't I just think so much more of the feline! Nice l'il cat. Nice Mr. Field. He is among my favorites. Right on the heels of it comes one of those beautiful dream romances—friend Quinn did himself proud with *The Lady of the Bells*. Well—can't say I thought too much of *In the Walls of Eryx*. The horrible invisible labyrinth was awful enough, but I'd rather have had the narrator lost in the very midst of the maze, instead of the rescue party finding him just spittin' distance from an exit. Mr. Munn pleases me more and more with some of the expressions he uses in *King of the World's Edge*—'a flittermouse came chirping.' Such a phrase sounds more weird and less evil than 'a bat flew.' The story is one of the most unusual I have read in some time. The short, *Finished Game*, proved somewhat refreshing, and a bit puzzling. The reprint ran right up my alley of historical adventure—with Bran Mak Morn going to some of the deeply horrendous extremes to accomplish a purpose—similar to those choking adventures that Jirel of Joiry employs. Robert Howard was all right in this yarn. Thus we come to the end of the October issue. Keep up the good work—the pages around 120—less printing on the cover."

Concise Comments

Gertrude Gordon writes from New York City: "Just finished this month's copy of WEIRD TALES and feel I *must* make a comment on *Towers of Death* by Henry Kuttner. It is the perfect fantastic story, complete, logical, with the hero rewarded and the villain punished most aptly and with the tag line giving just the right fillip of horror. It is a masterpiece."

Charles Hidley writes from New York

City: "Thanks for bringing back Eli Colter after a considerable and noticeable absence. Best stories are: *Towers of Death, The Withered Heart, Uncanonized,* and *The Phantom Drug* which was quite a pleasant surprise."

J. Vernon Shea writes from Pittsburgh: "I should like to see more of the work of Mary Elizabeth Counselman. *The Accursed Isle, The Three Marked Pennies, The Black Stone God* and her latest all possess most unusual twists and show a high imagination and knowledge of people. In her current story the Fortean ending alone is a let-down."

Clark Ashton Smith writes from Auburn, California: "Kuttner's story, *Towers of Death* is a neat little horror. I've greatly enjoyed both of Price's recent tales. Harry Ferman's drawings merit mention. His style is certainly one that lends itself to the rendering of weird atmosphere."

Edmond Hamilton writes from New Castle, Pennsylvania: "I have been much interested in H. Warner Munn's serial. It's a fine story and shows an extraordinary skill in dovetailing widely separated folklores. And Thomas Kelly's yarn coming up sounds as though it would be something special."

Most Popular Story

Readers, let us know what is your favorite story in this issue, and what you think about the magazine. We hope you like it well enough to recommend it to your friends. Send us a letter addressed to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City. Henry Kuttner's strange tale of black magic and dual personality, *Towers of Death,* was an easy winner of first place in our November issue, as shown by your votes and letters.

Chills • *Thrills* • *Shivers*

•

Black Was the Night

By

Laurence Bour, Jr.

•

Watch for this in WEIRD TALES

Coming soon in
WEIRD TALES

•

DRIFTING ATOMS

By

Mary Elizabeth Counselman

•

The story of a weird experiment that succeeded only too well

COMING NEXT MONTH

I SAT there by Loch Dhu, looking at the gray hills around me and seeing the blood-red scars on the hillsides that would never dry again. For down these rocky slopes the blood of my father and mother and my six stalwart brothers, my uncle Iain and many more of my clan had poured. That was the night the MacGreggans came in the snow, wrapped up like ghosts, with daggers in their hands to kill my people.

On that night I had run from the shelter of our house, being young and small at the time, with the shrieks and screams of the dying in my ears, and driven to desperation and whipped by fear and trembling I had taken refuge in the hills.

Around me, in the pall of the night, I heard the chopping of Lochaber axes and the popping crunch of skulls and breastbones, and there would be a shrieking yell that would rise in a keening wail, like a banshee.

Through this I ran, hearing the gurgling screams and curses and the deep breathing of the silent butchers. Bodies were cast at my feet, so horribly torn and severed that I turned from them with grief and horror.

Staggering amid this human wreckage I fell over the dead body of my uncle Iain, chief of the clan, his head split to the brisket by the downward stroke of a heavy broadsword.

"God help us!" I cried.

"The glen is full of devils," a voice said from nowhere. "The blood of the Douglas flows down the hills in a scarlet stream and runs into the Dhu as the red fingers of the MacGreggans run into the hearts of your people; Avenge them, Malcolm! Avenge them—or ye shall die for seven years and live in death forever after!"

Then it was that a great light came into my eyes and I turned to the valley and saw through the walls of the houses and into the darkness of the cabins. And what I saw there no man has ever seen before nor will any man see again, I pray.

I could see into the black hearts of the MacGreggans and witness the devils and hobgoblins leaping in demoniac glee as the strong hairy arms of the murderers wielded dirk and claymore, *skean dhu* and Lochaber ax on their helpless victims. . . .

You cannot afford to miss this powerful tale of the murder of the Douglas clan, the terrible life-in-death of those brave unshriven souls until released from their purgatory by their strange kinsman Malcolm Dhu Glas, and the weird vengeance he brought upon the Clan MacGreggan with the aid of the "little people." This unusual story will be printed complete in the February issue of WEIRD TALES:

The Horror in the Glen

By Clyde Irvine

——also——

a brilliant assortment of other weird stories

February Issue of Weird Tales . . . . Out January 1

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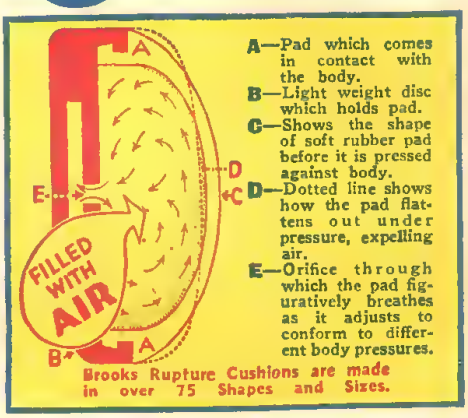

A—Pad which comes in contact with the body.
B—Light weight disc which holds pad.
C—Shows the shape of soft rubber pad before it is pressed against body.
D—Dotted line shows how the pad flattens out under pressure, expelling air.
E—Orifice through which the pad figuratively breathes as it adjusts to conform to different body pressures.

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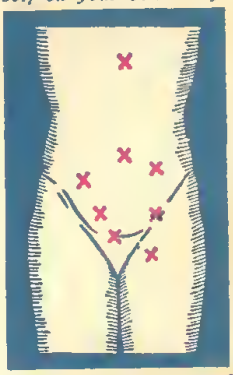

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